After seven long years, Voyager is home and her crew is safe...all except Lynne Hamilton, who is still the target of an unknown assassin. Coming home may have been the easy part.
FORWARD MOTION

PAST IMPERFECT SERIES – BOOK V

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

This is the fifth and final book in the Past Imperfect series.

For more in the series, go to fletcherdelancey.com.

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OTHER BOOKS BY FLETCHER DELANCEY

Past Imperfect Series

Past Imperfect
Present Tension
Future Perfect
No Return
Forward Motion

Chronicles of Alsea

The Caphenon

Without A Front: The Producer’s Challenge
Without A Front: The Warrior’s Challenge
Catalyst
Vellmar the Blade (novella)
Outcaste

To learn about the world of Alsea, immerse yourself in the Chronicles of Alsea site: alseaworld.com.
For all the readers who pestered me after No Return, saying the series couldn’t possibly end there. You were right.
She had been here so often. This time, gazing up at her wife, she felt almost like a supplicant; a worshipper at the altar. Certainly Lynne looked the part of a goddess. In her dress uniform, her head crowned with the green glow of a Borg power readout, she had a regal and otherworldly air.

Kathryn Janeway still couldn’t believe the miracle of her wife’s return. But there she was, standing erect in the regeneration posture, her face smooth and unlined. There were no signs of her recent death, unless one looked beneath her uniform to the new scars on her chest.

Stepping up onto the dais, Kathryn slowly approached her, not stopping until she was inside the alcove. She slipped her arms around the still body and stood up on tiptoe to deliver a kiss.

It was a different sort of kiss than she’d ever experienced before. Her lips tingled with an electric shock, and when she pulled away in surprise, Lynne’s eyes were wide open.

"Warning. Regeneration cycle incomplete."

She took a step back. “Lynne?”

But Lynne stared straight ahead, her green eyes unseeing, and Kathryn gasped as a crimson stain blossomed on the white dress jacket. The fabric curled outward, smoking at the edges, revealing a gaping chest wound from which the blood poured in a steady stream.
“No...”

It was happening again. Lynne was dying, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Desperately she tried to staunch the bloodflow with her hands, but it slipped between her fingers, warm and brilliant red. It stained her hands and splashed onto the deck, spattering her boots, and with every second more of Lynne’s life drained away.

If only Lynne would look at her. If only she would make that connection, just one more time. They had so little time.

“Please,” she whispered, looking from her bloody hands to the face she loved so well. “Please don’t leave me. Not again.”

But there was no recognition. Lynne’s expression was blank, her eyes glassy. The blood poured and Kathryn could only stand there, helpless in her terror, knowing that she could not survive a life alone.

“No!”

She came awake, her heart racing and her breath coming in gasping half-sobs as she fought off her panic. “It’s not true, it’s not true, it’s not true,” she whispered to herself, instinctively using her voice to speed her waking. The last wisps of the dream slipped into the night, her mind cleared, and she rolled over with a deep sigh.

“Fuck,” she mumbled into the sheets. Her body felt heavy.

What an awful dream. And the worst part of it was that it wasn’t really a dream. She’d lived that. She’d seen that glassy look in Lynne’s eyes; felt the hot blood flow over her hands.

She’s not dead, she reminded herself. She’s in the regeneration alcove right now, alive and healthy and strong. She was here not three hours ago. Focusing on her recent memories helped, but the sweat was cooling on her body and she was suddenly uncomfortably cold. Throwing aside the covers, she padded into the bathroom, turned the shower to the hottest temperature she could stand, and stepped inside.

Fifteen minutes later she was in uniform and ready for the day. She pulled a cup of coffee from her replicator and left her quarters, taking sips while walking a very familiar path to deck eight. It was late gamma shift, and there were even fewer personnel in the corridors than normal—none of whom were her own crew. The party was still in full swing on the Enterprise, while a skeleton staff from the flagship covered Voyager’s critical stations. She was certain that some of her crew were going to be worse for wear later today.
God knows they deserve it, she thought. That and more.

She was proud of her crew, and absolutely convinced that they were the best in the Federation. They’d come through seven years of isolation and danger with their ideals intact and their databanks full. A lesser crew would not have survived at all, much less maintained their Starfleet principles. The specter of the Equinox stood as a stark reminder of what they might have become had they not stood firm in their beliefs.

Mom was right. She smiled at the memory of her mother’s words, spoken during their first long conversation after Gretchen had unexpectedly appeared on board. We did good.

Her path led her to Cargo Bay Two, where a specially built alcove sealed off the Borg regeneration units from prying eyes. The door responded to her code, silently sliding open to reveal the room’s inhabitants. Lynne was there, peacefully regenerating alongside Revi and Seven. It was unusual to have all three women in their alcoves at the same time, but Revi and Seven had thought it wise to “top off” their energy reserves, as Revi put it. Lynne, of course, was under medical orders to regenerate for most of the day, and was scheduled to complete her cycle right before their arrival at the Sol system.

She stood below Lynne’s alcove, looking up at her as she had so many times before. The sense of déjà vu struck so strongly that, for just a tiny moment, the terror returned. She shook it off, reminding herself that Lynne was in her standard uniform, not the dress whites of her dream. But the tendrils of fear still curled around her spine, clinging tenaciously, shaking her confidence. In a deliberate challenge, she stepped up onto the dais, encircled Lynne’s body with her arms, and kissed her.

No tingle. No response at all; just the hum of the alcoves.

Despite herself, she felt a sense of relief. Stupid, really. But she didn’t care.

She turned to Lynne’s alcove readout and further reassured herself when she saw the perfectly normal heart rate. Forty-two beats per minute, well below what had been normal before her assimilation. That, too, had been hard for Lynne to accept—that the very beat of her heart was being regulated by a Borg implant. But it was that same implant that had kept her heart functioning long after she should have been dead.

“Regeneration cycle complete.”

She looked up as both Seven and Revi stepped out of their alcoves.
“Kathryn,” said Seven with a nod. “Are you well?”

“I’m okay.”

Revi gave her an appraising look. “You’re up early.”

*And damn you for noticing.* There wasn’t much she could hide from Revi, who had obviously seen the signs of stress on her face.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said. “It’s a big day.”

Revi stepped over to glance at Lynne’s readout, then wrapped an arm around Kathryn’s waist and gave her a gentle hug. “She’s in perfect health. Just a few more hours and she’ll be ready to kick ass again.”

“I hope so.” Kathryn’s gaze was drawn back to Lynne’s face. “Because, to quote B’Elanna, there are some asses desperately in need of kicking.”

Never would she have thought she’d actually feel a reluctance to go home. For herself, she was resigned to the political obstacle course she’d have to negotiate; was in fact already negotiating. But she had never envisioned their homecoming as a trial for Lynne. Then again, she’d never imagined sabotage or attempted murder, either—but they’d already survived those, and Lynne had been through too much now to be afraid of external dangers. No, her fears were of the internal variety: she was dreading the responsibility and the expectations of running the largest foundation in the entire Federation. Her parents had left her a very, very large role to fill, and Kathryn knew that Lynne would move stars and planets rather than feel that she had disappointed them.

“Well, if anyone’s qualified to do the kicking, it would be Lynne.” Revi squeezed her waist again.

“I agree,” said Seven. “If Starfleet awarded rank on the basis of ass-kicking capacity, you would be sharing the bridge with her.”

“I’ve never heard you use that word before.” Kathryn was torn between disbelief and laughter.

“It’s what you feared.” Seven’s face was deadpan. “Revi has corrupted me.”

The laughter won, and she squeezed Revi in her turn. “I had no doubts, my friend! I knew you had it in you.”

Revi playfully pushed her away. “If you think it’s an accomplishment to corrupt Seven, then you should be quite proud of yourself.”

“What? I never—”

“Tell me, Kathryn, does the phrase ‘If his ass were any wider, we’d have to install shuttle bay doors’ sound familiar? I heard that one last
night from my innocent partner, and I’m quite certain she didn’t pick it up
from me. Or B’Elanna. Or Lynne.”

Kathryn cleared her throat delicately. “Seven—”

“It was Admiral Carveggio,” said Seven. “I had never before seen such
an advanced case of obesity in a Human. Normal descriptive terms did not
do him justice, so I resorted to one of yours.”

Revi poked Kathryn in the shoulder. “That is your legacy. You took a
tabula rasa and sullied it.”

Kathryn poked her back. “Seven is no tabula rasa. Besides which, I
think she has influenced you more than the other way around.”

Seven raised an eyebrow. “Do you? Please elaborate.”

Kathryn smiled at the request. She says ‘please’ now, but it’s still Borg
phrasing. The thought gave her comfort. In this time of rapid change,
Seven’s mannerisms and speech were a welcome source of continuity.

“Well,” she said, knowing that she was going to change the tenor of
the conversation, “I really can’t imagine the pre-Seven Revi taking Lieu-
tenant Maris out at the knees the way she did last night. Can you?”

Revi looked at Seven, obviously embarrassed, but Seven shook her
head seriously. “No. Though I question how much of that was my influ-
ence, and how much was Revi’s normal character reasserting itself.”

“Thank you, darling, but you give yourself too little credit. Kathryn is
right. You have influenced me. Tremendously, and always for the better.”

And now it was Seven’s turn to look embarrassed. Kathryn watched in
fascination; an embarrassed Seven was not something she could recall
seeing before.

“Revi…” she said, not sure whether she could even ask this.

But her friend knew her too well. “You want to know what happened.”

“Only if you can talk about it. But it was…an amazing thing to see.”

“It was an amazing thing to feel,” added Seven.

Revi shrugged. “She pissed me off.” But Kathryn saw the pleased,
almost shy look that she shot Seven.

“I think there’s a little more to it than that. When she said that awful
thing to you about Steph, I expected almost anything from you except
what actually happened. Not that I wasn’t completely delighted to see it.
So what changed?”

“She went nova,” said Seven, and Revi smiled.

“Seven loves to compare me to astrophysical phenomena,” she said.
“That is not true.” Seven was never one to allow much in the way of teasing, unless it was accurate. “Though I could begin, if you wish.”

“No, I’m afraid of what you might come up with.”

“Ladies.” Kathryn didn’t bother hiding her smile. “I don’t want to pry, but—”

“But you wish we’d quit joking and explain?” Revi finished for her.

“I love listening to you joke,” said Kathryn seriously. “But I do have limited time.”

“I don’t know if I can explain it, Kathryn. It just...happened.”

Seven wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her closer with the unconscious assurance of a partner, and Revi snuggled in. As she watched, Kathryn had a sudden vision of the Revi she’d met on Dakmor: cool, reserved, untouchable, with walls half a kilometer thick protecting the raw and wounded soul inside. The Revi before her now, contentedly accepting love and comfort from Seven, truly was a different person. And Kathryn knew that no matter what her friend said, nothing had ‘just happened’ last night. Her transformation had been in process for a long time.

“When she called me a murderer, it hurt,” said Revi. “I mean, it really hurt. It was everything I’ve been dreading about coming home. My life has been so different on Voyager, but I knew that when we got home, things would probably change again. I’ve been waiting for it, and it was almost a relief, in a twisted sort of way, to have it happen. I didn’t have to wait for it anymore. But then she said I should kill myself, and something inside me just switched on.”

“I felt it,” said Seven. “Almost an emotional explosion. Like a reaction that has been gradually building up and then reached critical mass.”

“It was so clear,” said Revi. “All of a sudden I just...got it. I got what you and Seven and Lynne have been trying to tell me: I don’t deserve that kind of hatred. Maris’ judgment of me was based on nothing. She has no knowledge or understanding of who I am or what happened. And then I realized that the people who really do know and understand me don’t judge me. Voyager’s crew knows me. The Terellians knew me. None of them judge me. So why should I care what someone like Maris thinks? And that was it; that was all it took. Maris had no power over me. She couldn’t push me back, because I refuse to go. So...” She shrugged her shoulders, her expression slightly abashed. “I guess I finally figured out
that I don’t have anything left to prove to people like her. Took me long enough, didn’t it?”

Kathryn stood still for a moment, trying to get her voice to work around the tightness in her throat. Finally she managed to say, “Seven? Would you mind if I gave your fiancée a hug?”

“Certainly not.” Seven withdrew her arm and took a half-step away, and Kathryn swept Revi into a heartfelt embrace, squeezing so tightly that she heard something creak.

“Oof,” said Revi. “I’m not full Borg, you know.”

Kathryn released her. “Sorry, but I’m just so happy for you! That’s the best thing I’ve heard in…well, in a while. Good for you, Revi! God, this is wonderful!”

Revi ducked her head, then looked up with such a beaming grin that it was all Kathryn could do not to wrap her up again and squeeze the life out of her.

“It’s the best thing I’ve felt in a while,” said Seven. “She burned off the guilt like a star in nova phase burns off its outer shell. She felt…” She paused, then took Revi’s hand in her own with a soft smile. “She feels like a different individual.”

Revi met the smile with one of her own, and Kathryn sensed that she was witnessing an intimate moment.

“You look like one, too,” she said. When Revi gave her a questioning glance, she added, “I’ve never seen you look this relaxed except when you’re regenerating.”

“I guess I’ll have to take your word for that,” said Revi. “But I am still the same person. I can’t ever forget what I’ve done.” She looked back at Seven and squeezed her hand. “But I think…maybe I can forgive.”

Seven nodded at her, that same soft smile on her face. “You’re the only one who can.”

As Kathryn watched their exchange, she felt a strange combination of pride, friendship, and a little wistfulness. When did Seven become so wise in the ways of emotion? Both of her friends had changed so much in the last year. For that matter, everything had changed in the last year. And now…

She glanced at Lynne, standing tall in the black and gold uniform that was already a thing of the past.

Now it was all changing again.
Alison Necheyev hurried to her kitchen terminal, knowing exactly who was calling even before she saw the name on the screen. Only one person would have the temerity and the lack of manners to call her at 0630, though her aunt would never consider it ill-mannered. Fleet Admiral Alynna Necheyev simply maximized her time, and if others weren’t utilizing their time as efficiently, well, that was their problem.

Fortunately, she’d been up for an hour already, having been unable to sleep any longer. She was just too excited.

“Good morning, Aunt Alynna.”

Her aunt looked out from the screen with a faint hint of amusement in her otherwise stern expression. “Good morning, Alison. Is that plain?”

Alison looked at the orange juice in her hand. “You don’t honestly think I’d be putting vodka in this at six-thirty in the morning, do you? I’m not that Russian. How was the party?”

“I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

“Aunt Alynna! Come on, you know I’ve been pacing the floor here. What are they like? Tell me everything.” This was the first time Alison had been able to speak with her aunt since shortly after Voyager had reappeared on its scheduled launch from the Beta Quadrant. All she’d known up until now was that everything had gone as planned and the alien technology had worked perfectly. However, her aunt hadn’t been able to meet
Lynne Hamilton due to an injury the woman had suffered just prior to their launch from Terellia. The Admiral had been vague about that, simply saying she’d be meeting Hamilton at the party on the Enterprise. Alison was dying to hear her aunt’s impressions, both of Hamilton and Janeway.

Admiral Necheyev laughed. “Sometimes I still hear that eight-year-old girl in your voice.”

“Well, I’m especially close to eight years old right now. This is it, Aunt Alynna! They’ll be here tonight! I can’t wait to meet them. But I’ll settle for your impressions in the meantime.” She sipped her juice and regarded her aunt expectantly, knowing the older woman wouldn’t let her dangle for long. In the ten months they’d been working together, she had gotten to know her aunt in a way that would have been unthinkable before. As a child she’d been absolutely terrified of the severe, unsmiling person who occasionally visited her home. Later, when she began spending summer vacations at Aunt Alynna’s house in Russia, the fear had morphed to a great respect and a desire to please. As an adult she’d considered it the height of achievement to receive one of those short nods of approval. But over the past year she’d finally understood that Aunt Alynna was mortal. A powerful, accomplished mortal, to be sure, with low tolerance and high expectations—but a human being nonetheless, with a wonderfully dry sense of humor and a laugh that Alison loved to hear. She heard it a lot more these days, and the laugh had now replaced the short nod on her list of high achievements. She was proud that her aunt had become so relaxed around her. Their relationship was one of the true benefits that had emerged from this otherwise stressful and frightening situation with Voyager.

Now her aunt was smiling openly. “So you want to know what I think, but you’ll be re-evaluating when you meet them yourself? In that case I’m not sure what would be served by my telling you anything at all.”

Alison waved a finger. “Don’t even think of holding out on me. I haven’t had breakfast yet; my irritation threshold is very low.”

“Well, far be it from me to cross you before you’ve eaten breakfast. I suppose I should be grateful you’ve at least had your juice. As I recall, you were that way as a child, too. Your mother used to dread waking you for school.”

“And don’t try to distract me, either.” Though Alison made a mental note to ask her mom if that was true. She was almost certain it wasn’t.
“Single-minded and demanding…another fine Necheyev trait.”
“I learned from the best.”

The Admiral dipped her head, still smiling. Then the smile abruptly vanished. “She’s more than you think, Alison.”
“Who? Hamilton?”
“Yes. Janeway does not rule that roost.”
“You’re kidding.” Alison found this hard to believe. She’d only had one face-to-face conversation with Lynne Hamilton, back when they’d inaugurated the daily MIDAS communications. They’d traded a few recorded communications since then, but in none of those did Alison see anything that would lead her to believe that Hamilton was out of the ordinary other than her displacement in time.

“She stood up to me,” said the Admiral meaningfully.

Alison’s eyebrows rose. “Really? That’s a bit surprising.” She thought about it. “Then again, maybe not. She doesn’t know who and what you are, not really.”

“She knows. She just doesn’t care. I suspect that Lynne Hamilton cares very much about a few things, and very little about everything else. She’s a woman to watch out for, Alison. You’re going to have your hands full. Don’t underestimate her.”

“All right, I’ll keep that in mind.” Privately Alison planned to draw her own conclusions. She just couldn’t reconcile her aunt’s words with what she’d seen of Hamilton before now, and though the admiral was normally an excellent judge of character, she wasn’t infallible. “So what happened to her on Terellia? You said she’d been injured.”

Admiral Necheyev paused. “Bring out the Stolichnaya.”

Alison activated the program that would triple-encrypt their conversation, then gave the coded reply. “I’ve got the Stolichnaya. Do you have the glasses?”

“Yes.” The admiral fixed her with a level stare. “She died.”

Alison knew she couldn’t have heard that right, but her aunt was still talking.

“She and Janeway were abducted by Free Terellia terrorists. Between the two of them, they killed their abductors and freed themselves. But in the fight, Hamilton was shot in the chest with a high-intensity phaser. She died on the planet.”

Alison put her orange juice glass on the counter and crossed her arms.
Clearly there was more to the story, and she wasn’t going to say one word until she’d heard all of it.

“Janeway got her back to Voyager, where Doctor Sandovhar reanimated her. Apparently her Borg nanoprobes prevented a full biological death. Two days later she was at the party looking like nothing had ever happened. If I hadn’t read the medical report myself, I would never have believed it.”

From Admiral Necheyev, that was saying something.

“Well,” said Alison slowly, “I suppose that could explain why she stood up to you. After an experience like that, a few admiral’s bars might not seem like much.”

“I don’t believe personalities change overnight, regardless of the impe-tus. Lynne Hamilton is simply not what you thought. You’ll need to be a little more careful in your handling of her.”

“What about Captain Janeway?”

The Admiral’s lips twitched. “She’s going to require careful handling as well. But that’s my problem. Hamilton is yours.”

“I really hadn’t thought of her as a problem, Aunt Alynna.”

There was that half-smile again. “Perhaps you should.”

After telling Alison a few stories about the party and confirming some of the details for the homecoming celebration, Necheyev ended the transmission, leaving a very thoughtful Alison to finish her orange juice. She looked into the bottom of the glass, then toward her freezer unit. Finally she shook her head, deposited the glass in the recycler and went upstairs to dress.
By 1430 hours, Kathryn’s impatience was straining the limits of her self control. Why Necheyev was insisting on debriefings on this day of all days, she had no idea. Even Admiral Paris seemed to find it difficult to keep his attention on the proceedings. Necheyev caught him staring out the viewport and set her PADD on the table with a little more force than necessary, making a whap sound that brought his head around.

“Admiral Paris,” said Necheyev without any vocal inflections at all, “I believe we’ve done what we can at this time. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to speak with Captain Janeway alone.”

Suddenly the room was full of tension, and Kathryn felt her spine straighten. This didn’t sound good. Paris was staring at Necheyev in surprise, but could find no good reason to refuse. “Very well,” he said. “I look forward to seeing you on the bridge for the final journey, Captain.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” She returned his nod and watched him leave. When the doors shut behind him she steeled herself and faced Necheyev once more, finding cool brown eyes watching her as appraisingly as ever.

“We need to discuss your security situation,” Necheyev said bluntly.

It took her a moment to catch up. “You’re referring to Lynne.”

“Ms. Hamilton’s safety is of paramount importance to both Starfleet and the Federation, even if neither entity realizes it yet. We need her to reverse the Hamilton Foundation’s mission, and restore funding to space
exploration research and development. The Federation is already feeling the economic effects of the current mission, and it doesn’t have any ability to absorb those effects. Not after the Dominion War. Without your wife, we’re at an economic and tactical disadvantage. But the moment we land on Earth, her safety becomes more difficult to guarantee.”

“I know. So does she. We’ve already prepared Borg bands, not just for her, but also for Seven and Revi because they’ll be with us. If their Borg biosignatures are masked, scanners won’t pick them up.”

The admiral nodded in approval. “You're assuming that any potential assassin will know that she has Borg implants.”

“I’m assuming everything, Admiral.”

“Good. What are your plans for the next four days, until she proves her identity at the Hamilton Foundation?”

Kathryn didn’t bother to ask how she’d known about that appointment. “I planned to take her home. To Indiana,” she clarified, seeing the frown.

“Don’t you think that’s the first place anyone would look if they were of a mind to harm her?”

Kathryn hesitated. It wasn’t her first choice to discuss things of a personal nature with this hard-edged Admiral, but she had already saved them once. “I do think that’s a possibility, yes,” she said slowly. “But Lynne is…resistant to the idea of some nameless fear altering her plans. She and I have looked forward to going home for a long time. Our plan was to announce a different destination altogether, as a diversion. If I work that in to my speech tonight, it will be all over the press. Whoever is out there will be looking in the wrong place.”

Necheyev gave her a short nod. “Good thinking. Perhaps I can help you take that one step further. I suggest that Starfleet will require both you and Ms. Hamilton to remain at Headquarters. Unless the saboteur is a member of Starfleet with high security clearance, that story will be far more difficult to check and disprove. I can release a statement to the press within the hour. After the reception, we’ll be seen using a Starfleet hovercraft to take you to the secured campus. No one will know that you left again.”

Kathryn could only stare. She had been working on her own for too long; it was a shock to her system to realize that an ally sat across the table from her.
She’s been your ally all through this, she reminded herself. Just at a much greater distance, and without the ability to speak openly.

“Thank you, Admiral,” she said. “We appreciate the assistance.”

“Just keep her safe, Captain. We need her. Unfortunately, since she’s only a contract employee and I have no definitive proof as to who she is and why she might need protection, I can’t offer anything more. If I could, I’d ring your mother’s house with security staff.”

“I understand.” And Lynne would hate that. “I’ll do my best. But the truth is, Lynne is better than either of us at taking care of herself.”

“So I’ve noticed.” A smile came and went so quickly that Kathryn wasn’t sure she’d actually seen it. “Let’s not test that any further than necessary, shall we?”

“Agreed.” Kathryn waited, but the Admiral didn’t seem inclined to add anything. Well, perhaps now was a good time to get something off her chest. “Admiral, permission to speak freely?”

“Granted.”

“Before our trade agreement with the Terellians, there was some... doubt as to the outcome of President Gutierrez’ threat of a court-martial. I don’t know how many strings you pulled, and I probably never will. But I have no doubt that if you hadn’t stepped in, things would have turned out far differently. Thank you. Even though you could never say anything openly, I knew you were here helping us. And that made all the difference in the world. Just as it does right now.”

The Admiral eyed her. “You’re a polarizing individual, Captain. People either seem to love you or want you behind a force field. And if you ever defy a direct order of mine, I’ll have you court-martialed so fast you won’t know what day it is.” Her expression softened slightly. “But if I ever ordered you to commit an act that would almost certainly destroy your ship and crew, you can be certain that it would be for the benefit of the Federation, and not a political agenda.”

“I’m sure the President thought his order was for the benefit of the Federation,” said Kathryn delicately.

“I’m sure he did. But the order was not his to give.” Necheyev paused, absently tapping a finger on her PADD. “I take your point about having support here, Captain. You must have felt very isolated, even while you were reabsorbed into the command structure. To that end, and since we’re speaking freely, I would like you to know that you can also trust my niece,
Alison. She has been working for your safety since first learning of Ms. Hamilton, and she is the one who alerted me to the possibility of a mousetrap. If not for her, you would almost certainly have fallen victim to it.”

Kathryn nodded. “I suspected she was your connection, but I had no idea that she had been so directly involved. I look forward to thanking her tonight, then. And it will do Lynne a world of good to know who she can trust inside the Foundation.”

“Very well.” Necheyev tilted her PADD and looked at it briefly. “Speaking of Ms. Hamilton, isn’t she due to end her regeneration soon?” At Kathryn’s nod, she added, “I think we’ve covered what we can here. Perhaps you would like to invite her to the bridge for our arrival at the Sol system.”

The unexpected offer surprised Kathryn into a full smile. “I think she’d like that. Thank you.”

Necheyev stood, PADD in hand. “You’re welcome. Dismissed.”

Kathryn wasted no time getting to the door. Just before she stepped into sensor range, the Admiral said, “Captain.”

She pivoted to see Necheyev standing at the viewports, gazing at the star streaks. “Yes, Admiral?”

The neat blond head turned, and Kathryn saw something on the normally impassive face she couldn’t immediately identify.

“Be careful,” said Necheyev. “I know who you can trust. But I don’t know who you can’t.”

Kathryn nodded her acknowledgment and walked out. As she made her way down the corridor, she realized what it was she’d seen on Necheyev’s face.

Concern.

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KATHRYN ARRIVED at the alcove unit just in time to hear the computer announce the completion of the regeneration cycle, and practically bounced up the step to stand in front of the alcove as Lynne opened her eyes.

Lynne’s smile was instant. “Hi, love. Thanks for the kiss. I swear those make my regeneration more efficient.”
“You’re welcome. Do they make anything more efficient when you’re not regenerating?” She watched Lynne’s eyes crinkle and promptly forgot about everything else that had occurred that day. She only existed in the here and now, connecting with the woman she loved more than anything and anyone. Since Lynne’s death, she could not be near her enough to satisfy her almost frantic craving. At one time such a need would have terrified her, but now she simply gave in to it, knowing from experience that fighting it only made things worse.

Lynne wrapped her up in an embrace and kissed her tenderly. “I’m not interested in efficiency when I’m not regenerating.”

“Tuvok will appreciate knowing that, I’m sure.” Kathryn tipped her head back, giving Lynne better access to her throat.

“You don’t need to tell him,” Lynne murmured. She nibbled her way upward, and Kathryn raised her head in time to meet her in a kiss that soon crossed the line from tender to passionate. For a moment she lost herself in the sensations, feeling that ever-present need flaming up into something else entirely. With an effort she pulled back and rested her forehead against Lynne’s.

“God,” she whispered. “I can’t seem to just touch you anymore.”

“I know what you mean.” Lynne brought her hands up, holding Kathryn’s face with infinite care as she kissed her forehead. “It’s like we’re afraid that it could be taken away from us at any second.”

“This is why dogs eat so fast, you know.”

Lynne stopped moving. Then she dropped her hands with a snort and straightened up. “Where did that come from?”

Kathryn realized what she’d said and laughed. “I just lost suave points, didn’t I?”

“Oh, you lost a lot of them. And you’re not making them up any time soon.”

Encouraged by the look of amusement on her face, Kathryn tried to explain. “Mom was telling me about Molly at lunch today. I haven’t really thought about her in a while, but as soon as Mom started talking about her I suddenly realized that I’ll see her tonight, after the party. I get to see my dog tonight! I never thought I’d see her alive again.”

Lynne squeezed her. “I’m so happy for you. That’s going to be wonderful.”

“It will.” She couldn’t control the smile that threatened to split her
face. She’d adored her Irish setter, and the sudden orders that had sent her and Voyager into the Badlands had separated them when Molly had been pregnant with her first litter. She’d barely had time to ask Mark to take care of her. “There’s so much about coming home that’s worrying me,” she continued. “I still haven’t heard anything about the Maquis amnesty, and who knows what Starfleet is going to want me to do next, and you’ve got so much to deal with—but Molly’s still there. Something will be the same.”

“Kathryn.” Lynne’s voice was very gentle. “She’s seven years older. She’s not going to be precisely the same as when you left her.”

Kathryn waved that away. “Mom says she’s got a white muzzle and arthritis, but—it’s Molly. Dogs don’t change the way people do.”

“Ah.” Lynne nodded. “No, they don’t. And I’ll bet she hasn’t forgotten you, either. She probably also hasn’t forgotten that you left her with that moron Mark. Don’t be surprised if she bites you.”

Kathryn grinned. “She will not. Besides, Mark gave her back to Mom as soon as Voyager was reported lost. She was only with him for a few days.” She lowered her head and looked up at Lynne through her lashes. “Actually, Molly liked Mark.”

“I thought you said Molly was smart. Ouch! Hey!” Lynne squirmed away from Kathryn’s pinching fingers, but since she was still in her alcove there was nowhere to go. “Come on, stop!” Laughing, she grabbed Kathryn’s wrists and effortlessly immobilized her. “Sheesh. Some people are so sensitive about their pets.”

“Molly is smart.”

“I was talking about Mark.”

With a gasp of feigned outrage, Kathryn put all her strength into the effort to break away, then suddenly surged forward and captured her wife’s lips in a kiss. Lynne let go of her wrists and pulled her into a tight embrace, responding with equal passion. It was several minutes before Kathryn remembered her original errand.

“Sweetheart—” She tried with little success to pull away. “There’s something...I wanted...to ask yomphf.”

Lynne straightened after the final kiss. “Having problems with speech?”

“Yes! God, you’re like a teenager.”

“Look who’s talking, Captain Janeway. The hero of the Federation is
hiding in her cargo bay, making out while on duty.”

“Well, at least she has good taste—she’s making out with the richest and most powerful woman in the Federation.”

“Powerful in theory, anyway.” Lynne shook her head. “So what did you want to ask me?”

“Would you like to spend the final hours of our journey on the bridge?”

Lynne’s eyes lit up. “You mean it? Wait—won’t it be a bit crowded up there? What’s Admiral Necheyev going to think when you invite your unranked wife to the bridge?”

“She’s going to think I did what she suggested.”

“Really? Cool! You know, she’s not nearly as bad as you led me to believe.”

“She certainly can be. You haven’t spent the last two days in debrief-ings with her.”

“True. Has it been awful?”

“Considering how much I hate debriefings, yes. But they’ve been much worse than normal because I couldn’t be where I wanted to be.”

Lynne didn’t ask where that might be. “You did what you had to. And it’s not like I was awake to enjoy your company.”

“I know.” Kathryn stepped back and looked her over with a critical eye. “You look perfect. How do you feel?”

“Like I’m ready for anything. Not even any residual soreness.”

“Ready to go home, then?”

“I’m already home.” Lynne smiled. “But yes, I’m ready.” She took a step forward, her movement accompanied by the familiar sound of the alcove disconnecting. Rubbing the small of her back in a motion that had also become familiar, she indicated the door with her other hand. “Shall we?”

Kathryn stood unmoving, simply absorbing the sight of her wife appearing so perfectly healthy and normal.

“What?” asked Lynne.

“Have I mentioned that I love you?”

Lynne’s expression softened. “Not since I had to leave you last night. I love you too, you know. More than anything.”

Kathryn held out her hand, and Lynne took it. They didn’t let go until just before they stepped into the corridor.
Seven of Nine had never seen so many people on the bridge before. Besides the normal alpha shift bridge crew, she and Revi were sharing the science station, B’Elanna was at the auxiliary engineering station, Lynne was standing next to the captain’s chair, and Admiral Necheyev was in Chakotay’s chair. Chakotay himself was standing on the upper level near the turbolift, along with Gretchen Janeway and Admiral Paris. It was a bit disconcerting.

Focusing on her readouts, she nodded and turned, clasping her hands behind her back. “Captain, we are now within visual range of Xena.”


The screen changed to show a dark, icy, dead planetoid—the outermost planet of the Sol system. The bridge fell silent as Voyager’s crew savored their first view of the familiar. Silent, that is, except for a tiny snort.

“Ms. Hamilton, would you care to share the source of your amusement?” Kathryn’s voice was clipped and commanding, but Seven could hear the affection threading through it.

“Sorry,” said Lynne. “I still haven’t gotten over the fact that there’s a tenth planet, and you named it after a television character. Not that it wasn’t a great show,” she added hastily. “Actually, I loved it. But I spent
my whole life thinking there were nine planets, all named after the Roman versions of the Greek gods. And now there’s...Xena. I think it’s fabulous.”

“There is an interesting story regarding the discovery of Xena,” said Seven. Several pairs of eyes turned to her, including Revi’s.

: Really? I didn’t know this one. :

Seven smiled at her before returning her gaze to Lynne. “In January 2000, two astronomers made a wager regarding the discovery of a Kuiper Belt object larger than Pluto by the end of 2004. The prize was three bottles of champagne. In December 2004, the loser bought the champagne and prepared to send it to the winner—but on January 5, 2005, his team discovered Xena. The winner of the bet decided to overlook the five-day discrepancy and instead sent three bottles of champagne to her colleague.”

“Very gracious of her,” said Revi.

“She was probably a fan of the show,” said Lynne. “I bet if the loser had named it something like Apollo she wouldn’t have done it. Actually I’m a little surprised it wasn’t named Apollo, since he was the only major Olympian god left out of the lineup. But they could also have named it Juno or Minerva. I’ve always wondered why Venus was the only Olympian goddess represented in the names of our planets.”

“Probably because the planets were named at a time in our history when women had very little power,” said Gretchen. Kathryn turned in her chair, though Admiral Necheyev kept her eyes firmly ahead. Seven detected a two-degree tilt of the Admiral’s head, however, and knew that she was listening despite her outward appearance.

“Why do you say that?” asked Kathryn. “If they were named when women had little power, the question should be why there’s a feminine planet at all.”

“No, she’s right,” said Lynne. “Because Venus was the goddess of love.”

“And therefore no threat to masculine power,” Gretchen added. “But Minerva was the goddess of wisdom and a fierce warrior woman. And Juno was the goddess of marriage and Jupiter’s wife, but she was powerful in her own right and he was afraid of her.”

“Because he couldn’t keep his pants on and it pissed her off,” said Lynne. “And let’s not forget Diana, goddess of the hunt. Another powerful woman warrior. Gretchen, I didn’t know you knew ancient mythology.”
“I loved those stories when I learned them in school,” said Gretchen. “Tales of powerful gods and goddesses; acts of heroism...it seemed so different from the world I lived in.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t anymore. This bridge is full of heroes.”

Seven watched in fascination as nearly every person on the bridge shifted in their seat and looked embarrassed—including Revi.

: Why is the bridge crew embarrassed by that?: she asked her partner.

: I suppose because most people who carry out heroic acts don’t think of themselves as heroes.: 

: So you don’t think of yourself as a hero?: 

: I don’t think Gretchen was including me.: 

: Certainly she was. She knows what you did at Terellia, to save me.: 

: That wasn’t heroism. That was love.: 

: What is the difference?: 

Revi shook her head, but Seven could feel her exasperated affection.

“The heroes aren’t restricted to this bridge,” Kathryn was saying. “They’re all over this ship, and I think there are a good number in the ships around us as well. I’ve read some remarkable stories about the Dominion War.”

“It’s true that harsh times can bring out the best in us,” said Admiral Necheyev, speaking for the first time. “Necheyev to fleet,” she added in a more commanding voice. “Slow to orbital speed.”

While they’d been discussing Olympian gods, Voyager had reached Xena. Now they dropped out of warp and cruised by the planet.

“That is so cool,” said Lynne. Seven failed to understand what was so remarkable about this completely ordinary class C planetoid, but she could hear the awe in Lynne’s tones.

: It’s not ordinary to her, Seven. She’s never seen her home system before. She was taken off Earth before warp drives existed.: 

: I’ve never seen my home system before, either.: 

: No, but you’ve seen a hell of a lot more, darling.: 

: So has she, in the Collective’s memory.: 

: Somehow I don’t think she thinks of it quite that way.: 

Kathryn tapped a control on her panel and spoke. “All hands, this is the captain. Welcome to the Kuiper Belt System; we are now passing Xena.”

The bridge fell silent as everyone watched the nondescript planetoid
on their viewer. In any other place it would have held little attraction for
them, but this was Earth’s backyard, and the import of the moment struck
even Seven as she watched not the planetoid, but her crewmates. The
identical expressions of reverence on their faces was something she had
never before observed. No one moved or spoke until Xena had passed off
their viewscreen and the Admiral had ordered the fleet back to warp one
point eight.

“Well, it was nice to see a familiar face,” said B’Elanna in an offhand
voice. Her comment broke the spell, and nearly every person on the bridge
visibly relaxed. Everyone except the Admiral, whose straight back rivaled
even Seven’s own posture.

“It certainly was,” said Harry with a broad smile. “Xena looks good.”

“And now we know a little more history about it,” added Chakotay.
“I’ll never think of this planet again without remembering two
astronomers and their champagne bet.”

“Oh, but Seven left out the rest of it,” said Lynne. “I looked this up
way back when I first came to Voyager. Turns out that after Xena was
discovered and named, the International Astronomical Union met to
decide whether it really qualified as a planet—which meant they had to
decide if Pluto qualified as well, since Xena is bigger than Pluto.”

“Clearly they decided it did,” said Kathryn.

“No, actually they didn’t. They dropped both planets from the lineup,
renamed Xena after Eris, goddess of discord—typical, eh?—and decided
the Sol system had only eight planets. Which messed up a whole lot of
textbooks, teaching curricula, and a few billion adults and children who
felt like they’d lost a good friend. Pluto was culturally embedded; it’s not
easy to erase a planet. And a huge number of people loved the idea of a
planet named Xena.”

“I didn’t know this,” said Necheyev, who by now was watching Lynne
along with everyone else. “What happened to reverse their decision?”

“The children. Unlike most of the adults, they wouldn’t take the
astronomers’ decision as final. They protested and flooded their govern-
ments and the International Astronomical Union with letters. Which
brought a few of the more powerful world leaders around to their point of
view, and it had a domino effect. Eventually the IAU caved in under pres-
sure, though according to the records it wasn’t too difficult, since the
initial vote to demote Pluto had been pretty contentious. That was when
the third category of local planets was added, so now we have the Inner System, the Outer System and the Kuiper Belt System. And they reinstalled Xena’s name at the same time, when the astronomers who discovered it stood up and demanded it. They said they’d given up the name at the insistence of the IAU, but if the decision on Xena’s planetary status was going to be reversed, then they wanted their old name back, too. So you know this planet as Xena thanks to a whole lot of outraged children from three hundred and seventy-three years ago.”

“Never underestimate the tenacity of children,” said Kathryn. “Are you taking notes, Lieutenants Torres and Paris?”

“Hey, if our child defies the authority of a collection of academics to do what she knows is right, I’ll be behind her all the way,” said B’Elanna.

“I wouldn’t know anything about defying authority,” said Tom, earning a general round of snorts. Admiral Necheyev glanced briefly at Admiral Paris, then returned her gaze to the Lynne.

“Interesting,” she said. “You’re quite a resource, Ms. Hamilton.”

“Of trivia, yes.”

“Of more than that, I think. The next stop will be Jupiter,” she added. “I’m afraid Neptune, Uranus and Saturn are in the wrong part of their orbits for us to do a scenic tour.”

“Sorry you’re missing Saturn, Lynne,” said Harry. “It’s worth a look.”

“I bet. I’d love to see Saturn’s rings close-up. And the Enceladus Preserve—when I left Earth, the idea of life on Enceladus was just conjecture.”

“I’ve always been partial to Jupiter,” said Kathryn. “The first planet of the Outer System, the end of the Inner System warp speed limit—for me it was always the boundary between home and the rest of space.”

“You talk about the Inner System like it’s the home neighborhood you rode your bicycle around,” said Lynne.

“In a way, it was. I suspect that’s true for most of us who were trained at Starfleet Academy.” Kathryn looked around the bridge, garnering nods of agreement.

“Well, we Earth-bound ancestors of you young folks thought of Jupiter as an exotic mystery—it took us years just to fly a probe there. We never even saw a clear photograph of any of Jupiter’s moons until the probe sent them back...in nineteen eighty, I think.”
“Nineteen seventy-nine,” said Tom. “I know all about that probe. It had a very worthy name.”

“Care to fill us in?” asked Kathryn.

He turned and smiled at them. “It was the first of the Voyager probes—Voyager One.”

“In my lifetime, no probe ever went as far as that one did,” said Lynne. “It was supposed to last five years, but by the time I left it had already been operating for over twenty. Do you know what happened to it, Tom?”

He nodded. “It sent information back until its thermoelectric generators finally failed in 2026. By then it was over eighteen light hours from Earth and had been in continuous operation for forty-nine years.”

“Beating all the odds,” said Kathryn. “You’re right, Tom—it was well named.”

There was a momentary silence as the crew savored this bit of history.

“Funny to think it took all those years just to get eighteen light hours away,” said B’Elanna. “And less than forty years later, Zefram Cochram made the first warp flight. If he’d been able to sustain his propulsion on that first flight, he could have caught up with the Voyager probe in less than a day.”

“Feels like I left just before all of the interesting things started to happen,” said Lynne. “Now we have ten planets, there’s life on Enceladus and Europa, Jupiter has two Great Red Spots instead of one—sheesh, you go away for a few hundred years and the whole solar system changes.”

“Technically there are not two Great Red Spots,” said Seven, who could never bear inaccuracy. “There is only one. The other is Red Junior.”

Lynne laughed. “I know, I love that name! Poor little storm system. It probably has a complex. You’d think the astrophysicists could have come up with something a little more original. They should have talked to the team that named Xena.”

The fleet dropped out of warp twenty-one minutes later, just outside the Jupiter system. Three of the inner system moons were visible on their viewscreen; the fourth, Callisto, was behind the planet. Jupiter itself dominated the screen, and Seven turned to watch Lynne’s reaction. She was not disappointed; her friend was staring at the viewscreen with wide eyes.

“Holy…” Lynne apparently remembered where she was. “Wow. I never
realized you could actually see the storm systems and the cloud bands moving. It’s…gorgeous.”

“It is beautiful, isn’t it?” Kathryn smiled up at her.

Seven looked at the view, trying to see it from their perspective. She saw an unremarkable Class J planet, inhospitable to carbon-based organisms and useless from a technological perspective, unless one were mining for hydrogen or helium. Given that those were the simplest of all elements, they had very limited function for most technologically advanced species.

She supposed the speed at which Jupiter rotated might be of some interest. Though it was eleven times larger in diameter at its equator than Earth, its daylength was the shortest of all the planets in the Sol system at only nine point eight six four hours. This rotational speed was largely responsible for the gaseous movement that so fascinated Lynne; and Seven conceded, after one point four minutes of observation, that the movement did indeed have some aesthetic appeal.

A beep drew her attention to her station. She frowned at the reading, her instincts instantly on alert. Raising her head to warn Kathryn, she found Admiral Necheyev looking right at her. The admiral gave an almost imperceptible shake of the head, and Seven stopped, confused. Plainly the Admiral knew what was out there and did not wish Kathryn to share in the data.

“Helm,” said Necheyev, “alter course to twenty-six mark five eight.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Tom. The view on the screen changed as Voyager turned toward the planet.

“I thought Ms. Hamilton might appreciate a closer view,” Necheyev added, forestalling any questions.

By now Seven had identified the signatures on her board. Had they not been benign, no amount of rank would have kept her from disobeying the Admiral’s silent order. As it was, she simply folded her hands behind her back and watched while Harry Kim made his own discovery. With a broad smile, Harry opened his mouth—then shut it again as Necheyev turned her gaze on him. Flushing, he straightened and kept his eyes on the screen, where Callisto was just now coming into view from behind the planet.

: *What does she have up her sleeve?* : Revi was even more curious than Seven.
“Full stop,” ordered Necheyev.
“Is this a scenic stop on the tour?” asked Kathryn.
“No. We’re here to pick up your honor guard.”
“My hon—” Kathryn stopped as she stared at the screen, along with every other person on the bridge. A stream of Peregrine-class attack fighters was pouring out from behind Callisto, in squadrons of six ships. As the first squadron neared Voyager it split in half, three ships pulling straight up and the other three diving down. All six performed a 180-degree rotation in perfect synchrony as they flew above and below the line of fighters in tight formation, rejoining at the end of the line. When the second squadron reached Voyager, the six ships snapped into a vertical orientation and then split, streaking right and left. They remained vertical until they reached the end of the line, when they rolled upright and tucked in behind the first squadron. Each squadron alternated the direction of flight, their movements perfectly timed. The effect, Seven concluded, was quite impressive.

By the time the ninth squadron had peeled away, the first had reached Voyager once again. As the last fighters rejoined the line, the entire force came to a stop and Harry’s board beeped.
“Captain, we’re being hailed,” he said.
“On screen.”

A young woman in a Starfleet cadet uniform looked out at them. “Captain Janeway,” she said crisply, “the senior class of Starfleet Academy pilots welcomes you and your crew home. We will be escorting you for the remainder of your journey to Earth, and will precede you in your final flight to Starfleet Headquarters.”
“I see,” said Kathryn, and Seven knew she was smiling even though she could not see her face. “What’s your name, Cadet?”
“Nadina Lichtman, Squadron Leader, Nova Squadron.”
“Well, Cadet Lichtman, I’m sorry you’ve been stuck with escort duty. I’d imagine you had much better things to do this close to exam time.”

The cadet’s stiff manner evaporated as her eyes widened. “Oh, no ma’am! We couldn’t wait for this! Everyone—” She stopped, consciously straightening again. “I mean, it’s a great honor, ma’am. We’re all proud to be here.”

“And I’m proud to have the entire senior class of pilots escorting us home, Cadet. That was some pretty trick flying you just displayed.”
“Thank you, Captain.” Lichtman tried to maintain her stoic expression, but failed as her face cracked into a large smile. “If you’ll follow us?”

“Lead the way.” Kathryn sat back in her chair and crossed her legs. “Lieutenant Paris, see if you can keep up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The screen reverted to a view of the fighters in time to show the first squadron peeling off and heading away from Jupiter, followed by all the others in turn. When the ninth squadron had joined up, Tom keyed his board and Voyager leapt in pursuit. “Warp one,” he announced. “Estimated time of arrival at Mars is twenty-three minutes.”

“Tom, you’re looking a bit envious there,” said B’Elanna. “Feeling slow?”

“Not at all.” Tom turned in place and gave his wife an easy smile. “They’re not the only ones who get to show off.”

“Oh, really? Care to share?”

“Nope.” Tom spun his chair around and faced forward again. “You can find out when everyone else does.”

“I’m not saying a word,” said Kathryn before B’Elanna could ask. “You can all keep your shirts on for another half hour. A captain has to have some secrets.”

Necheyev’s stern face broke into a small smile. “So does an admiral. I hope you don’t mind not being in on that particular secret, Captain. I didn’t think you should be the only one who didn’t have some sort of pleasant surprise on this flight.”

“Everyone on this crew knows how much I hate surprises, Admiral. But that was a very nice one.”

“Are you kidding? That was incredible!” said Lynne. “It was like being right in the middle of a Blue Angels or a Snowbird show! Damn, those cadets are good.”

“The North American military flight teams?” Tom spoke while watching his board. “You saw them?”

“Oh yeah. Every chance I got. The Thunderbirds, too—I loved watching any of them. They were just poetry in the air. The best time, though, was when I was climbing a mountain in Waterton Peace Park—that’s in the Canadian Rockies—and saw the Snowbirds go screaming by me at eye level. They were practicing in the area, and I’d had no idea. I sat there and watched them for most of an hour, and it was absolute magic.”
“What a life they had,” said Tom wistfully. “Going from place to place, flying precision maneuvers, signing autographs for the kids who worshipped them...”

“You can sign an autograph for me if it’ll make you feel better,” said Harry.

“Thanks.”

“Why would you wish for a life of such limitations?” asked Seven.

“Yeah, Tom,” said B’Elanna. “Would you really have wanted to spend your days flying something that could never break orbit?”

“Well...not all my days. But what they did then—those pilots were riding the ragged edge of their technology. They were the absolute best in their field.”

Admiral Necheyev was observing this exchange with interest. “With your résumé, Lieutenant Paris, you could apply for a test pilot position with a near certainty of getting it.”

There was a pause while Seven watched B’Elanna’s face go through an extraordinary range of expressions. Tom checked his board and then turned.

“Thank you, Admiral,” he said. “If I were younger that would be a very tempting offer. But I think I’m past that part of my career now.” His gaze moved beyond the Admiral to B’Elanna, and the smile on his face matched hers.

“Good answer, Tom,” said Chakotay from the back. “I think you just saved your hide.”

Tom turned back to his board amid smiles and chuckles, and the crew settled in for the last few minutes of Voyager’s journey.

The bridge chatter slowed as they approached the Inner System, and when they were near enough for Harry to put Earth onscreen, all talk died instantly. Only the occasional chirp of a station broke the reverent silence, and even Seven found herself feeling a little awed. She’d seen this planet so many times in records and logs, but never like this. Never knowing that its motion was real-time, and that she was mere minutes away from landing on its surface.

The stillness was broken by a distinctive voice.

“All hands, this is the captain. If you’ll turn to your nearest display, you’ll see something we’ve all been waiting for. Looks like there’s a storm over northern Australia today.” Kathryn paused, surreptitiously wiping
her eye before continuing, “We’ll be coming out of warp in just a few minutes for a flyby of Mars and Utopia Planitia; after that we will resume our course for Earth at full impulse. Please take this time to verify your station’s readiness for atmospheric flight and a landing.”

She sat back in her chair, and Lynne silently rested a hand on her shoulder. They remained that way for the rest of the flight to Mars.
When Admiral Necheyev ordered the fleet to drop to full impulse, Kathryn thought her heart might pound right out of her chest. Right now, if she were to look out a view port, she’d see Earth with her naked eye. No sensors, no long-range instruments—just her own vision. It might be no more than a tiny blue dot from here, but it was her blue dot.

And there, looming huge on their viewscreen, was Mars—Earth’s backyard. She’d spent childhood vacations here. She’d swum in the Martian quarries from the age of fourteen. Voyager was built here. The travel time from Mars to Earth at full impulse wasn’t much more than the time it took to fly a hovercraft from her mother’s house to the Bloomington transport station.

This was it. For seven years she’d dreamed of this moment, and now that it was here she wanted to remember every nanosecond of it.

The warm pressure on her shoulder briefly increased as Lynne squeezed, and Kathryn looked up at her. Lynne’s green eyes were sparkling with excitement, wonder, and what looked suspiciously like tears.

“Part of me never wants it to end,” she whispered.

“I know.” Kathryn understood this too well. She may have devoted her entire existence to getting this ship and crew home, but there were aspects of their life on Voyager that she was loathe to leave behind. The
sense of family, the shared purpose—would she ever find this again? Certainly not on a starship. Probably not anywhere.

She covered Lynne’s hand with her own, tangling their fingers together. It was the only means she had right now to communicate her gratitude for Lynne’s presence. Their relationship was her rock, the one thing she knew for certain would carry through to her new life. Life after Voyager...it was a strange concept.

“It’s not the Mars I remember.” Lynne’s voice was hushed with awe. “A bit drier back then, wasn’t it?”

“Just a bit. When I left Earth, terraforming was a science fiction fantasy. God, look at it now.”

Kathryn had seen images of Mars before terraforming began. It was hard to imagine the planet ever looking that way, with no atmosphere, no water and no vegetation. The red soil still gave the planet its timeless color, but now wispy clouds shielded the surface and great swaths of green stained the red; evidence of vast forests and agricultural fields. Mars Colony itself was a huge city at the base of Olympus Mons, which towered three times as high as Earth’s Mount Everest. Lynne had long ago declared her intention to climb it, and Kathryn knew it was only a matter of time.

“I can’t wait to take you swimming in the quarries,” she said quietly, smiling in anticipation of the expected response.

“And I can’t wait to take you up that mountain.”

Kathryn’s smile turned into a full grin. They’d had this discussion before, but now it meant a lot more than it ever had. Now they were looking at the very things they had once spoken of in wistful fantasies, never knowing if they would see home again. Keeping her voice low, she said, “I don’t know, Lynne. Doesn’t seem like it would be much of a challenge in that gravity. I think diving the quarries is a lot more difficult.”

She chuckled. “Don’t give me that look until you’ve tried it.”

“Swimming is never harder than climbing. Everyone and their dog can swim. Not everyone can climb.”

“Not everyone can swim these quarries. The currents are nasty.”

“Oh yeah, you probably have to breathe hard for a few minutes. My god, how do you do it?”

“I’ve climbed Olympus Mons,” said Admiral Necheyev, her eyes still on the viewscreen.
“You have?” Kathryn and Lynne asked simultaneously. Necheyev’s lips quirked into a small smile as she glanced over.

“Don’t look so surprised, Captain. I do recreate occasionally. And Ms. Hamilton, I can tell you that you’re in for a hell of a time. What you gain in lack of gravity you lose in sheer drudgery, because it takes so long to get to the top.”

“See?” Lynne elbowed Kathryn, then looked over at the Admiral. “What’s it like?”

“It’s worth the drudgery.”

Kathryn watched a huge grin spread over Lynne’s face. “Well, I guess I know what I’ll be doing during my leave,” she said.

“Oh, we can swim too,” said Lynne generously. “After we climb.”

“Good thing I don’t need any rest, then. I’m getting the feeling that the last seven years will be a walk in the park compared to keeping up with you.”

Lynne’s eyes softened, but before she could answer, Admiral Necheyev ordered the fleet to half impulse. All eyes were on the screen as they covered the last few hundred thousand kilometers, slowing to quarter impulse and finally to orbital speed as they arrived at Utopia Planitia. The shipyard, a bustling hive of tiny shuttles, pods and thruster platforms when Kathryn had last seen it, was strangely deserted. Three gorgeous new ships crouched in their docks, in varying stages of completion, but the activity that normally went on around them was nowhere to be seen.

Harry magnified the view, having pinpointed the main observation lounge of the shipyard, and it became immediately obvious where the normal working population had gone. Through the enormous viewports, Kathryn could see that the lounge was wall-to-wall people. They were applauding and thrusting fists into the air, their mouths open in soundless shouts, and every one of them wore an expression of joy and pride. Some were even crying as they cheered. It felt a little odd to witness this silent euphoria and know that it was directed at her and her crew.

“Captain, we’re being hailed by the shipyard,” said Harry.

“Put it on.” Kathryn steeled herself.

The view changed, showing the crowd from a point inside the lounge itself, and the bridge was suddenly filled with a deafening roar of applause, shouts, and whistles. The noise continued for over two minutes while Voyager slowly drew even with the observation lounge, then
matched its speed. An older woman wearing admiral’s bars stepped onto the podium to the side of the viewports, holding up her arms, and gradually the cacophony died down.

Turning to face the screen, the admiral said, “Captain Janeway, I’m Admiral Ngomo, commander of Utopia Planitia. It is my very great pleasure to welcome you and your crew home at last.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” said Kathryn, but she wasn’t sure anyone heard her over the applause that had erupted the moment the admiral finished her sentence.

Smiling, Admiral Ngomo let the clapping continue for a while before raising a hand to quiet the crowd. “As you can see, we’re all a bit excited over here. It’s been a long time coming, Captain. Is there anything you’d like to say to these folks?”

Kathryn looked at the crowd, reveling in the sight of so many different species and such a range of ages and gender. This was what she loved about the Federation.

“Yes, I would,” she answered. “Tell me, how many of you were here when Voyager was built?”

Another cheer rose up as nearly a third of the crowd raised their hands.

“You built a damn fine ship,” she told them, and had to grin at the huge burst of stomping, whistling, and shouting. When it died down she continued, “Voyager was never designed for deep space exploration, but that didn’t matter. You all did such a fantastic job on her that she brought us home anyway. Over seventy thousand light years, through too many battles to count, even through the Borg’s home territory, this ship pulled us through. If you’re building those three ships out there with the same standards of quality and professionalism—and I know that you are—then the crews who will fly them, live on them, and depend on them for their safety have nothing to worry about.”

She paused as another roar prevented further speech, and saw Admiral Ngomo discreetly giving her a thumbs up.

“By the way,” she said when she could be heard again, “I had Voyager cleaned and polished at the last space station we stopped at. How does she look?”

This time it was a good fifteen seconds before the noise died down, and she couldn’t help but laugh.
“I think so, too,” she said. “I think she’s going to make one hell of an impression landing on the front lawn of Starfleet Headquarters.”

More applause, but she spoke through it. “The best part, though, will be when she takes off again. I don’t know who will command her, or who her crew will be, but I know one thing for sure: Voyager is ready to go anywhere.” Over the cheers, she added, “As for us—we’re very, very glad to be home. Thank you for giving us such a warm welcome.”

“It’s our pleasure, believe me,” said Admiral Ngomo when she could be heard. “We’re all feeling pretty fortunate to be the first ones to see you arrive. Enjoy the party at Earth, Captain. I hear it’s going to be a big one.”

“Thank you, Admiral. I hear there’s going to be a bit of a bash up here, too.” Starfleet had given all non-essential staff a holiday in observance of Voyager’s arrival, and there were parties scheduled all over the Federation. “Try not to keep them all up too late,” she added.

This was greeted by catcalls and more cheering; plainly the staff of Utopia Planitia were counting on a late night. Kathryn laughed again and bade the crowd goodbye. When Harry cut the transmission, the sudden silence was deafening.

“Well, Admiral?” She turned to Necheyev. “Shall we finish this?”

Necheyev studied her for a beat longer than necessary before nodding. “Yes. The fleet is yours to command, Captain.”

“Thank you,” said Kathryn, keeping her surprise off her face. She’d just been given a provisional promotion to fleet admiral, and even though it might only last a quarter of an hour, it was still a tremendous honor. “Lieutenant Kim, open the fleet channel.” At his nod, she said, “Captain Janeway to escort fleet. Set course for Earth, full impulse.” She paused. “Engage.”

The cadet squadrons responded instantly, with Voyager and the fleet following. Kathryn almost wished she could have been on the observation lounge at Utopia Planitia to see the spectacle—fifty-four Peregrine-class fighters leading a fleet of forty-six of Starfleet’s finest ships, including the flagship and Voyager, must have been one hell of a sight.

It was a trip of just sixteen minutes to Earth, and every bit of it was as familiar to her as the fields around her childhood home. She’d flown impulse shuttles over this distance as a cadet and a young officer; later she’d flown faster ships, and later still she’d given up her own piloting for the executive officer’s and then the captain’s chair of even larger and
faster ships. The route varied depending on the positions of Earth and Mars in their respective orbits, but the stars beyond the system were always the same. These were her stars, and this was her space.

And now...there it was. Earth, on the viewscreen with no magnification at all. Kathryn was so enthralled at the sight that she nearly forgot to order the fleet down to orbital speed. They flew one circuit around the globe, in the opposite direction to planetary rotation, and Kathryn drank in the sight. There were Australia and Indonesia, basking in the morning sunshine. Dawn had not yet reached Europe, and she could easily pinpoint the major cities by their lights. By contrast, Africa was a dark mass outlined in light from its far more populous coastal cities.

Feeling Lynne's hand on her shoulder once again, she looked up to see an expression of wonder on her face.

"My god," whispered Lynne. "It's so beautiful."

Kathryn covered the hand with her own. No words existed to express just how lovely it was, so she didn't try. She just held on, a quiver in her stomach as she watched South America approach. Like Africa, South America was outlined in light, though the bands of light on its coastlines were much thicker. And there was North America, shining brightly throughout much of its interior. Her home was shrouded in darkness; the sun had just recently set over Indiana. But the west coast was still enjoying the last few minutes of daylight, and it was here that the fleet separated. While the fighter squadrons and Voyager moved ahead to finish their circuit, the remainder of the fleet broke off to establish a geosynchronous orbit over San Francisco. The captains and senior staff of those ships would beam down for the reception.

Voyager, meanwhile, soared over the Pacific Ocean, passing over Hawaii and an enormous breadth of bright blue water that shone in the midday sun. When Australia appeared again, Kathryn ordered the squadrons to geosynchronous orbit and instructed them to prepare for atmospheric flight. Next she opened the all hail.

"All hands, this is the captain. We will begin our final approach in approximately five minutes. Secure all stations and prepare for a possibly turbulent atmospheric entry." Looking at Lynne, she said quietly, "This could get bumpy, sweetheart."

Lynne raised an eyebrow. "It shouldn't. You're plotting something."

Kathryn just smiled at her, then turned to address her mother,
Chakotay and Admiral Paris. “I’d advise you to take a firm hold of the handrail. Standard procedure dictates that all members of a starship crew be stable and secure during a landing, and you’re not. Neither are you,” she added in an undertone to Lynne, while watching Gretchen and the others step forward to the rail.

“Got it.” Lynne turned and walked up the ramp, standing next to Gretchen.

When five minutes had passed and all departments had checked in, Harry opened the channel to the fleet for the last time.

“Captain Janeway to cadet squadrons.” Kathryn paused, savoring the moment. “Take us in. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Acknowledged,” came a voice she recognized as Cadet Lichtman. The nine squadrons moved out almost as a single entity, and Kathryn admired their discipline. Tom was right on their heels as they swung around, reversing their direction of travel and dropping toward the atmosphere. Soon the screen turned dark as Voyager’s shields heated up, temporarily blocking their visual sensors. Kathryn turned her attention to her console, reading the data as she felt the vibrations increase beneath her feet.

*Just a few more seconds—there.* The ride smoothed out and the viewscreen came back to life, showing the same blue waters they’d just passed over, but far closer this time. Now they were racing eastward, losing altitude at an enormous rate. This time Hawaii passed beneath them almost in the blink of an eye as they ticked off their final kilometers. They’d get to San Francisco just after sunset.

“Escort squadrons slowing to Mach ten,” said Tom. “Mach nine. Mach eight.” By the time they dropped under the speed of sound, Kathryn could clearly make out the Sierra Nevada mountains. Then the coastline rushed up to them, and there it was: the Golden Gate Bridge. The image wavered briefly, and she blinked her tears away.

“Showtime, Lieutenant Paris,” she said.

The cadet squadrons had rearranged themselves during the descent, each of them moving smoothly into a formation that resembled an arrowhead: one ship on point, two behind it, and the last three bringing up the rear. Nine of these arrowheads soared over San Francisco Bay in one huge diamond formation, no doubt delighting the crowd that jammed the bridge from one side to the other. Voyager, however, lagged behind, as Tom used the spit of land between the ocean and the bay to delay the crowd’s
view. When her console beeped, indicating that Tom was ready, Kathryn gave the order.

“Commander Tuvok, fire torpedo bay one.”

They’d picked up a little package from the Enterprise the day before, and only a few members of Kathryn’s crew knew about it. She took a great deal of delight in the startled looks on her bridge crew’s faces as they heard her order, and Tuvok’s calm “Torpedo away.” A white streak showed the trajectory of the torpedo as it flew toward the bridge, with Voyager hot on its tail.

It was, to use Starfleet slang, a water bomb—a torpedo containing pressurized hydrogen and oxygen. And when it exploded just west of the Golden Gate Bridge, it created an instant and perfectly disc-shaped vertical cloud, obscuring the bridge from view. Voyager punched through it just seconds later, streaking over the bridge and then spiraling straight upward, putting on a show that no one in San Francisco would ever forget. But Tom wasn’t through yet; after pulling out of the climb he dove down once more, flying under the bridge in the only Starfleet-approved maneuver of its kind in history. Regaining a more respectable altitude, he flew a slow circuit of the bay as the fireworks began.

“Jesus god!” Lynne burst out. “Talk about trick flying!”

“Nice work, flyboy,” B’Elanna added, and the bridge crew spontaneously burst into applause. Tom blushed red to the tips of his ears.

“Just another day on the job,” he said, trying for his usual insouciant tone and completely failing as his voice caught.

“No, it’s not,” said Kathryn, and the bridge went quiet. “Lieutenant Paris, your skills are a big reason for our presence here today. Thank you for bringing us home safely.”

Tom looked over his shoulder, and Kathryn had rarely seen his expression so open. She’d just paid him an enormous professional compliment, with his father as witness. He quickly looked back to his board, making fine adjustments. “No thanks necessary, Captain. It’s been an honor and a pleasure.”

Their final moments in flight were too short, Kathryn thought. It seemed to take no time at all to complete their circuit of the bay, with fireworks exploding silently all around them. Then they were hovering over Starfleet Headquarters, and she was giving the orders to engage their landing gear. Slowly, carefully, Voyager settled to earth, and in her mind’s
eye Kathryn saw a great bird of prey coming to rest and folding its wings over its back.

“Disengage engines,” she said, and the subtle hum of Voyager’s warp core ceased. For a moment she felt lost; that hum had been a part of her life for seven years. Shaking off the sensation, she checked her console, saw that all was in order, and opened the shipwide channel.

“All hands, this is the captain.” She took a deep breath. “Shut down all systems and secure all stations. And that is the last order I will give you as captain of Voyager. Welcome home, everyone. There’s a big crowd waiting for us to disembark, and we’ve got about ten minutes to change clothes while they walk over from the safety zone. The senior staff and I will be waiting for you at the ramp. Enjoy the reception, and remember that you have until 1800 hours on Wednesday to complete the removal of your belongings. So take your time—we’re not going anywhere. Janeway out.”

She closed the channel, secured her own console, rose from her seat and turned. The bridge crew was bustling around her, getting ready to leave, but all she saw were the two women standing side by side at the handrail. Her mother was watching her with an almost sad smile, while Lynne’s expression was completely unreadable.

A light touch on her arm stopped her as she began to move away, and she looked back.

“Things may get a bit busy after this,” said Admiral Necheyev quietly. “So I just want to say this now. You’ve done a fine job, Captain Janeway. You rose to an impossible challenge, and I believe you represent the best of our ideals. We’ve knocked heads before, and will undoubtedly do so again, but that doesn’t mean I don’t hold you in the highest regard.”

Kathryn was at a loss for words. Necheyev had a better poker face than anyone she’d ever known; during their debriefings she’d never had a clue as to what the Admiral was thinking. Certainly she had not suspected actual approval. “Thank you,” she said, feeling that it was utterly insufficient. “That means a great deal, coming from you.”

Necheyev gave her a short nod. “You’re welcome. Of course that also means my expectations of you have just gone up as well.” She held out her hand, indicating the doorway. “I believe you have some people to say goodbye to.”

“Yes, I do.” Kathryn turned and walked to the upper level, stopping in
front of Lynne and Gretchen. “We need to go. I’ve got to change clothes and be at the ramp before it opens.”

“I know,” said Lynne. “Come on, Captain Janeway, I’ll escort you out.” Kathryn smiled at the reference and preceded her personal security escort into the turbolift. Gretchen came with them, but when they arrived at deck three she waved them on. “I’ll meet you at the ramp,” she said.

“Okay, we’ll see you there.” Kathryn walked out with Lynne. They entered their quarters and stopped at the same time.

“Well, that’s different,” said Lynne as she looked out the viewports. Their normal view of stars had been replaced with the glowing white columns of Starfleet Headquarters and the teeming mass of humanity surging around its marble steps. In the distance, the Golden Gate Bridge gleamed in the dim red light of dusk.

“It sure is.” Kathryn watched the people jostling for position near the cordoned pathway that led from Voyager to the building’s main entrance. “I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to being on the ground again.”

“You’ll get used to it.” Lynne pulled her into her arms and dropped a soft kiss on her temple. “I know it’s going to be tough, but just try to imagine getting used to fresh coffee, and the smell of those cornfields, and Molly greeting you every morning.”

“Oh, god.” Kathryn sniffed back a tear. “Don’t do that. I need to focus on playing my part tonight, and that doesn’t include getting all weepy over the thought of seeing my dog.”

“I disagree. I think the media would go nuts over the great Captain Janeway showing emotion for her dog. Your picture would be on every FedComm unit in the Federation.”

“That’s not exactly the picture Starfleet wants. Come on, I’ve got to change.” Reluctantly, she let go of Lynne and walked into the bedroom, where her dress uniform was already laid out. As she began to disrobe, Lynne walked in behind her and went to the closet, pulling out her own dress uniform. Kathryn paused. “You’re wearing that?”

“Well…yeah. Is that a problem?” Kathryn shook her head. “It’s most definitely not a problem. I really hoped you’d wear it tonight, but I wasn’t sure you’d feel comfortable in it.”

“Well, I gave some thought as to who I want to be tonight, and I decided that I’d rather be your wife and personal security escort than
Lynne Hamilton, head of the Hamilton Foundation. That one I can face later. So I’m not going in civilian dress tonight.”

“I’m glad,” said Kathryn, returning her attention to getting her own clothes on. “Because I completely adore you in that uniform, and seeing you in it tonight will be like an extra gift.”

Warm arms surrounded her, foiling her efforts to pull on her shirt, and a low voice whispered in her ear.

“I’ll wear this uniform any time you want me to, love. It’s not something that has to go away.”

Kathryn tilted her head, looking up into green eyes. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

Their kiss was gentle but too short; they were far too aware of the time. Kathryn finished dressing and dashed into the bathroom for a quick touch-up of lipstick, then waited impatiently while Lynne did the same.

“Ready?” she asked.

“As I’ll ever be.”

They walked to the door and stopped, both looking back at their quarters.

“I’m going to miss this,” said Kathryn. “There are a lot of memories here.”

“I know, me too.” Lynne reached out for her hand. “Before we go, there’s something I’ve been wanting to say to you.”

“What’s that?”

Lynne smiled. “Thanks for giving me a lift home.”
Saying goodbye to over one hundred and forty people was an exhausting task. Kathryn knew she’d see some of them again; she was planning to keep as many as she could for her next crew. But even if she could keep them all, it wouldn’t be the same. Seven years of the only existence any of them had known was now at an end, and the strain was clear in the faces of her crew. While some were euphoric as they came down the corridor, shaking hands with the senior staff and the admirals who lined both sides of the doorway, many others were in tears or visibly fighting them. And even those who were smiling seemed a little on edge. They’d made an art form of dealing with the unknown, but this was the biggest unknown of all: coming home to a world that had moved on without them. A war had been fought, a new president had been elected, family members had been born and died, people had changed. The only true constant was the ship and the crewmates they were now walking away from, and despite all they had to look forward to, the knowledge of what they were leaving behind loomed large.

Kathryn was the last person on this final tour. She stood right by the door, shaking the hand of every crew member who walked past her and off the ship. Some of them simply thanked her; others had a few words to say; all of them deserved her full attention. She gave as much as she could, always mindful of the others waiting behind. And every now and
then, when the person in front of her had walked down the ramp and the person with Chakotay hadn’t yet finished, she would look across the corridor at her mother and Lynne and marvel yet again that this was actually happening. She’d fantasized about it so many times that the actual event was surreal.

Lynne had no formal position in the lineup of senior staff, but Kathryn hadn’t wanted her out of sight. So she stood on the other side of the door, two paces back—just enough to not actually be in the lineup, but close enough to be available for anyone who wanted to say goodbye to her as well. And there were quite a few who turned from Kathryn to her, saying a few words before stepping through the door. When Kathryn had time to look, she could see the toll it was taking on Lynne. After all, Voyager truly was her home; more so than to anyone else except Seven. And her home was being emptied. Kathryn was grateful for her mother’s presence; she couldn’t imagine how much harder this would have been for Lynne otherwise.

Eventually the steady flow became a trickle as the last members of the crew came through. Some of them took the opportunity to talk longer; others were in a rush to get out and blew through their farewells with excited smiles and quick handshakes. They were fewer and further apart, and at last came the time when Kathryn looked up an empty corridor.

“Computer, list crew members currently aboard,” she said. Her senior staff stayed in their positions as they listened to the ship’s computer rattle off the names. There was no one left but themselves.

“All right,” she said. “Time to join the party.” She left her post, joining Lynne and her mother as her senior staff grouped themselves around the exit. “Everyone ready for the glare of the spotlight?”

“Have you seen what it looks like out there?” asked B’Elanna, gazing with horror at the scene before them. “This is a media circus.”

“And you’re one of the stars,” said Kathryn, chuckling at the look that earned her. “B’Elanna, you’re a former Academy student turned Maquis turned chief engineer of the long lost Voyager. Sorry, but there’s no escaping the fact that you are a Story with a capital S.”

“Then I guess I’ll be grateful that you, Lynne, Chakotay, Seven and Revi are stories with all capital letters,” she said. “As long as any of you are around, I get to shrink back into the shadows.”

“Yeah, but you, Tom and Harry are the lieutenants, so you have to go
first,” said Lynne. “That means you take the full brunt of the bright lights
until a bigger fish comes out. I think Kathryn and I will just wait here for
ten minutes or so.”

“You wish,” said B’Elanna. “Come on, Tom. Let’s get this over with.”

They moved to the entrance, with Admiral Paris right behind them. The
moment they stepped through, Kathryn heard a roar from the crowd.


“Well, at least Admiral Paris is enjoying it if they’re not,” said Admiral
Necheyev. Kathryn had to stifle her smile.

“Guess we’re next,” said Harry, who was standing with Tal Celes.

“You realize that if you go out that way, you’re making a global
announcement,” said Kathryn, gesturing toward their clasped hands.

He looked at Celes, who tightened her grip and smiled back at him.

“We know,” he said. A moment later they were gone, to another roar from
the crowd.

Tuvok stepped up, his face impassive as always. “T’Pel looks forward
to seeing you at the reception,” he said. “And to meeting you, Ms.
Hamilton.”

“It will be good to see her again,” said Kathryn.

“I’ll be honored to meet your wife. And I’m holding you to that invita-
tion,” said Lynne.

He raised an eyebrow. “There is no need to ‘hold’ me to anything. The
invitation will not be withdrawn.”

“I know. And I’m looking forward to seeing Vulcan. Actually you may
be seeing me sooner rather than later, if the Foundation scares me
too much.”

“In that case, I will not say goodbye.” He turned and strode out.

“Was he teasing you?” asked Gretchen, her brows furrowed.

“Hard to tell, isn’t it?” said Lynne. “You’re good, Gretchen. It took me
about a year and nine months before I could figure it out.”

“That’s not true,” said Kathryn. “You caught on sooner than that. I
don’t think it was more than a year.” She looked around at the knot of
officers standing at the door. “Oh, come on. Let’s just go. I don’t want to
do this anymore.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Revi. She held her hand out to Seven.

“Want to make a global announcement?”
“In some ways, Humans are efficient.” Seven took her hand. “A simple nonverbal sign to say so much.”

“Can I hold your hand, Commander?” asked the Doctor, sidling up to Chakotay. That got a general laugh, and with Admiral Necheyev leading, they went through the door as a group. Kathryn, Lynne and Gretchen brought up the rear, and when they stepped into the brisk evening air, Kathryn was momentarily deafened by the roar that went up from the crowd.

B’Elanna was right, it was a circus. A padded rope barrier guarded by Starfleet security personnel held the crowd away from a wide path which stretched from Voyager’s ramp to the steps of Starfleet Headquarters. She could see the last of her crew walking toward the steps, waving as the crowds to either side applauded and held up signs of welcome. A lump rose in her throat.

“Amazing,” said Lynne.

“Not surprising,” said Gretchen.

Kathryn couldn’t say anything at all. They walked down the ramp, a thousand flashes blinding her as the moment was recorded for posterity, and then they were in the middle of it, walking between the barriers as people reached over, shouting things she couldn’t hear above the general roar of applause and whistles. It was deafening and overwhelming, and the masses of people became a formless blur until she caught sight of a little girl, perhaps six years old, right in front and waving at her happily. She smiled and waved back, earning a bright grin from the girl and wide smiles from her parents, standing behind her.

“She probably wasn’t even born when you left,” Lynne said into her ear.

“I know. Kind of puts things into perspective, doesn’t it?”

The applause and cheering never slowed, even as they climbed the steps and stood on a temporary podium that had been erected for the occasion. Admiral Necheyev escorted Kathryn to a spot near the transparent speaker stand, bristling with holographic recorders and microphones, while the Federation President and the Starfleet Commander-in-Chief stood nearby. The rest of her group moved off to the side, out of view of the cameras but not the crowd.

At last President Gutierrez stepped to the microphone and held his hands up, quieting the crowd. His amplified voice boomed over the
grounds as he skillfully used the occasion to boost his image. He thanked Starfleet Command for doing everything it could to bring their lost ship home, and spoke in measured, practiced tones of loyalty, history and great moments of courage. Through it all Kathryn managed to keep a smile on her face, though she spent the duration of the speech fantasizing about exposing him for the asshole he truly was. *We’re here in spite of you, not because of you,* she thought mutinously, and knew by Lynne’s expression that she was thinking the same thing. But this was time for politics, not truth.

After the President finished, Starfleet’s Commander-in-Chief had her turn. Her speech was shorter and much more to the point, outlining precisely what Starfleet had done in its attempts to recover *Voyager* but noting that in the end, it was the ship and crew that had brought themselves home, with an inter-quadrant treaty in hand, no less. She briefly suggested the possibilities that treaty had opened, sketching a hopeful future that would help to heal the lingering wounds of the Dominion War, then announced that she would now turn the stand over to the person they’d all been waiting for. This was Kathryn’s cue, and she stepped up to shake her superior’s hand. flashes went off everywhere, followed by a second burst as she shook the President’s hand. When she turned to the speaker stand, the two dignitaries stepped in to flank her, presenting a photo opportunity that all San Francisco apparently took advantage of, judging by the storm of flashes. Kathryn hoped she’d be able to see clearly again by the end of her speech.

“Our journey home,” she began, “we met a great number of new races. Some of them were welcoming. Many were not. All of them were different. But I can tell you, with absolute authority…” She paused, then grinned. “We never met anyone who could throw a party quite like this.”

**Alison Necheyev felt** a bit like that eight-year-old her aunt had teased her about this morning. She stood on the opposite side of the podium from the *Voyager* officers, watching Kathryn Janeway address an estimated crowd of fifty thousand and knowing that every one of them was now eating out of her hand. Her speech made both the President’s and the Starfleet Commander-in-Chief’s seem like so much lip flapping; common and expected and some-
thing simply to be endured before getting to the good part. They spoke like politicians. But Captain Janeway was that rarest of creatures: a politician who made everyone think she was not. She spoke with a combination of authority, assurance and informality that made her seem accessible and admirable all at the same time. Alison was awed, and enjoying every second of it.

“Well, now we know why they made it home,” said a female voice.

Startled, she turned to find Elise Hamilton and Charles Fornay standing next to her. With their matching black hair and similar heights, they looked more like relatives than Elise and her cousin Adele. Charles had married into the family via Adele, though Alison secretly thought that he made a much better Hamilton than his wife did. Adele’s attractive blond looks belied a rather unpleasant personality and a singular disdain for anyone who wasn’t of use to her. Elise had far more charisma, and her light gray eyes sparkled with an intelligence that Alison had seen displayed time and again in board meetings.

But why were Charles and Elise out here? She’d thought they would be inside, heading the receiving line along with Brian Hamilton. As officers of the Hamilton Foundation’s board of directors, they certainly had the power and prestige to be there by name alone. The fact that Lynne Hamilton was now standing just on the other side of the podium was all the more reason for them to be present.

Then again, maybe they just didn’t want to miss this scene. Alison turned back to watch Captain Janeway easily captivating the crowd. “She’s definitely a leader,” she said.

“Hell, I’d follow her anywhere,” said Charles in a tone of frank appre-ciation. “She wouldn’t even have to make it an order.”

“Down, Charles.” Elise elbowed him. “Sometimes I’m surprised Adele lets you out unsupervised. Where is she, anyway?”

“Inside. She didn’t want anything to do with the speeches.”

“Well, she missed out,” said Alison. The other two nodded as they listened to Captain Janeway wrapping up her speech. The crowd roared its approval when she finished, and she raised her hand in a farewell gesture, smiling broadly before turning away. She went straight to Lynne Hamilton, wrapping an arm around her waist as the group of officers and digni-taries moved off the podium and into the building.

“It’s certainly been an interesting evening so far,” said Elise. “I loved
that flying stunt under the bridge. Can’t believe Starfleet actually autho-
rized it. Shall we go?” She gestured toward the side entrance.

“Any reason in particular that you two are skulking around back
doors?” asked Alison, turning to walk with them.

“Uncle Brian is representing us in the receiving line,” said Elise. “They
don’t need the Vice Chair and Secretary if they’ve got the Chair. And I’m
not a fan of cameras.”

“And anyone going through those doors is fair game,” added Charles,
pointing behind them at the main entrance.

“I suppose you’ve had a good deal of experience in avoiding cameras,”
said Alison, who hadn’t really thought about it until now.

Comes with the name.”

“Yes, as soon as I married into that name I acquired the gene as
well.” Charles grinned at them.

“That’s because Adele gave you hers. She actually doesn’t mind being
photographed. Me, I can’t be bothered to spend that kind of time
worrying about how I look.”

This was a rather ingenuous statement, Alison thought. Elise never
looked anything but elegant.

“Adele doesn’t mind because cameras love her,” said Charles. “If a bad
photograph exists of her, I haven’t seen it.”

“I haven’t either, damn her.” Elise grinned at Alison, her eyes crinkling
in amusement.

It was interesting, seeing these two outside the boardroom. She’d
never been around Charles and Elise in a social situation. As the CEO of
the Hamilton Foundation, she was its public face—attending functions
and being photographed and interviewed was part of her job. Normally
the Hamilton board officers did not subject themselves to such things,
preferring to stay out of the limelight and in the back rooms where the
power truly lay. But tonight’s reception was different. Everyone who was
anyone had tried to be in attendance. Alison had heard some stories about
favors traded and gifts given that stretched even her credulity, and she was
fairly jaded about such things.

Charles jogged ahead and opened the side door with a flourish.
“Ladies,” he said. “Shall we meet a legend?”
“There are quite a few legends in there,” said Alison as she stepped past him. “Which one were you thinking of?”

“He wants to see if Captain Janeway will give him an order.” Elise was right behind her.

“If only she would,” said Charles. The door shut behind him, blocking the roar of the crowd and making the corridor seem hushed by comparison.

“What’s the matter, Charles, Adele not domineering enough?”

Jesus, thought Alison. She wasn’t sure if Elise was teasing or not.

“Judging my marriage by what you wish you had? There are clubs for that sort of thing, you know.”

Alison reached the door leading to the lobby and turned just in time to see Elise flashing a rude hand gesture at Charles. “Are you certain you’re not related by blood?” she asked. “Because you look like it, and now you’re acting like it.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” said Elise as she and Charles joined Alison in the doorway. “God, those poor people. Just stepped off the ship and bam, they’ve been dropped right into the political swamp.”

The immense, high-ceilinged lobby of Starfleet Headquarters had become a reception hall tonight, ablaze with light and filled with music, food, a very long bar, and more dignitaries per square meter than Alison had seen since the last Presidential inauguration. The officers of Voyager were still making their way down the receiving line, their progress slowed by the fact that every person in the line seemed to have something to say. It was definitely different from the usual such thing, where a smile, a handshake, and a quickly forgotten introduction were the order of the day. She spotted Captain Janeway and Lynne Hamilton instantly; Ms. Hamilton’s unique dress uniform stood out amid the crowd of Starfleet officers. They had nearly reached Brian, and a moment later she watched as the Chair of the Hamilton Foundation reached out for Captain Janeway’s hand, smiled and said a few words, and then turned to Lynne Hamilton. Nothing in his facial expression indicated anything but pleasure at meeting her as he shook her hand.

“Is he still doubting her?” she asked.

“Uncle Brian would doubt Jesus himself if he appeared in that receiving line,” said Elise. “It’s not that he’s suspicious of her in particu-
lar. It’s just that there’s a great deal at stake and he won’t be satisfied until the proof is in his hands.”

Alison turned to her. “And what do you think? Still certain?”

“Oh yes. How could she be anything but the real thing? And I think that deep down Uncle Brian believes it too; he’s just waiting for the empirical evidence.”

Charles nodded as Alison looked at him. “She’s real. When the possible explanations for a fraud being out there are more outrageous than the explanations for the real thing…” He shrugged. “But she’s going to have to prove herself. And that’s a meeting I’m looking forward to.”

“I feel sorry for her,” said Elise, her gaze on the receiving line. Alison turned back to see Ms. Hamilton nodding at something Brian was saying.

“Why?” she asked.

“Can you imagine vanishing from here and reappearing in the year 2753? With no friends, no family and no idea of how anything works? And then you don’t even have the chance to figure it all out quietly; instead you’re in the spotlight from the moment you arrive. That poor woman will have no idea what hit her. When word gets out who she is, she’s going to be a target for every fundraiser, politician, charity project, social climber and scam artist from here to Romulus.”

“That poor woman, as you call her, is the wife of Captain Janeway,” said Charles. “I think she’ll be well protected.”

“Don’t you think it’s your job to protect her as well?” asked Alison, earning surprised looks from her companions. “She is your family.”

“She shares our name, Dr. Necheyev,” said Elise. “That doesn’t make her our family.”

Startled by the cool tone of her voice, Alison swiftly revised her opinion of Elise Hamilton. “Then I guess it’s a good thing she’s made a family of her own on Voyager,” she said. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to dive into the swamp.” Without waiting for a response, she stepped through the door and into the crowd, making a beeline for the bar. She’d actually liked Elise right up until this moment. In the boardroom, her professionalism was beyond reproach, and her easygoing humor often acted as a counterpoint to Brian’s more uptight leadership style. But this cool dismissal of an honest-to-god blood relation did not sit well. That she could say she felt sorry for Lynne Hamilton one moment and disavow
any association the next…well, it smacked of the careless me-first attitude that Alison found all too common among the rich and powerful.

She ordered two chilled shots of vodka at the bar and stood waiting near the end of the reception line, smiling and nodding at familiar faces as they passed by. Aunt Alynna worked her way down the line, stepped off the end and came right over.

“How’s the hand?” asked Alison, offering one of the shots.

“Sore.” Admiral Necheyev picked up the shot and tossed it back in one swallow. “Thank you, Alison. Your mother brought you up well.”

Alison sipped her own drink. “Knowing when to have the vodka ready is a sign of a good upbringing?”

“Among other things.” The Admiral called a waiter over and dropped the empty glass on his tray. “Ready to meet them?”

“I’ve been ready for a while.”

They stood together companionably, watching the senior officers of Voyager move down the line. “That’s Commander Revi Sandovhar and Annika Hansen,” said the Admiral with a discreet gesture. “Ms. Hansen doesn’t respond well to the name, though. She prefers her Borg designation, Seven of Nine.”

Alison shivered. “I suppose if that’s all she knew since the age of six, it makes sense. What about the Commander?”

“I haven’t spoken with her very much, but Owen and I asked Captain Janeway quite a few questions about her. According to the Captain, she’s left her Borg past well behind her. She hates them just as much as anyone else; perhaps more. They took a great deal away from her.”

Alison knew she wouldn’t get much more than that out of her aunt, who was a stickler for protocol and did not share personnel information. But she was curious about the Commander’s history with the Borg. The number of people who had survived assimilation and come out with their sanity intact was, so far as she knew, limited to Captain Picard, Seven of Nine and now Commander Sandovhar.

“She must be a strong person,” she said. “She was with them far longer than Captain Picard.”

“Seven of Nine was with them for eighteen years.”

“Yes, but Seven of Nine was raised by them. She didn’t have a lifetime of memories taken away.”

“And then given back,” said the Admiral cryptically.
“Hello, Admiral Necheyev.” They turned to see Gretchen Janeway approaching, a drink in each hand. “I’m glad it was you on that line and not me.”

“Ms. Janeway,” said the Admiral. “May I introduce you to my niece, Dr. Alison Necheyev. When she’s not attending Starfleet functions she’s the CEO of the Hamilton Foundation.”

“Yes, I know.” Gretchen Janeway nodded at her. “It’s good to make your acquaintance. I’m sorry, but my hands are too full to shake yours.”

“I had no idea you were a two-fisted drinker,” said the Admiral, and Ms. Janeway smiled.

“Only at receptions stuffed full of stuffed shirts.”

Alison snorted, earning a bigger smile.

“I see you’re in agreement, Dr. Necheyev. Actually, these aren’t for me. I knew where my daughter and daughter-in-law would be going next. It’s not a coincidence that you’re both standing here.”

“Caught,” said Alison. “I admit I’ve been anxious to meet Captain Janeway and Ms. Hamilton for some time.”

“Well, here’s your chance.”

Alison felt a frisson of excitement as she watched the two women step off the reception line, look around and spot them. Gretchen Janeway raised a glass, and Captain Janeway smiled. In a few steps they were there.

“Mom, you’re a lifesaver.” Captain Janeway accepted a glass of brown liquid and ice, which Alison was reasonably certain was a whiskey and soda. She shuddered in disgust. Well, even great captains had to have their down sides. Perhaps Captain Janeway simply hadn’t had a proper introduction to good vodka.

“Soda with a lemon twist for you, Lynne,” said Ms. Janeway, handing over the glass and earning a grateful look. “Since they don’t have the Hamilton special here.”

“Thanks, Gretchen. Guess I should have brought a thermos of the good stuff.” Lynne Hamilton sipped her drink and looked over the top of the glass at Alison. “Dr. Necheyev,” she said, lowering the glass and holding out a hand. “It’s good to meet you face to face.”

Alison shook her hand, noting the very firm grip. It wasn’t until after releasing it that she realized she’d just shaken hands with a prosthetic. “I’ve been looking forward to this for a long time,” she said. “Aunt Alynna
and I had our moments of doubt. I’m so glad you’ve all made it home safely. Captain Janeway, this is an honor.”

The Captain’s handshake was no less firm. “The honor is ours. And thank you for helping Lynne. We appreciated the background information on the Foundation; it’s helped us to know what she has to deal with.”

Alison heard what was not being said. On the surface, Captain Janeway was thanking her for sending the files that would prepare Ms. Hamilton for her eventual inheritance, but she didn’t doubt for a moment that Janeway had also understood what she had to watch out for. Her mind flashed back to Elise, coolly dismissing Lynne Hamilton from the family, and she knew for a certainty that Ms. Hamilton was in far better hands with the woman before her.

“Anything I can do to help, I’m happy to do,” she said, looking from one to the other. “And Ms. Hamilton, assuming that there are no issues with proving your ancestry, I’ll soon be your employee anyway. So please don’t hesitate to ask me for whatever you need.”

Ms. Hamilton looked uncomfortable. “Let’s not worry about my ancestry tonight, hm? I’m just happy to be—”

“WOO HOO!” shouted someone nearby, causing heads to turn.

“Oh, good god,” said Captain Janeway.

“Let me take your drink for you,” said Gretchen Janeway. She snatched her daughter’s drink from her hand just before a flying body impacted, sending the captain staggering back a step.

“GODDAMN it’s good to see you!” The new arrival held the captain in a crushing hug, then pulled back just enough to reveal a face wreathed in smiles. A face, Alison realized, that had to belong to a Janeway. There was no mistaking the nose and cheekbones, though the riot of long, dark, curly hair and the far larger bone structure was certainly different.

“It’s good to see you, too.” Captain Janeway’s grin was ear to ear, and Alison was a little taken aback at how it transformed her face. “Even if you’re still as disruptive and incorrect as ever.”

“Fuck being correct; this place needs some livening up.” The woman pulled Janeway back into a fierce embrace. “But first I have to hug you a bit more.”

Gretchen cleared her throat. “Admiral, Dr. Necheyev, this rather profane individual is my youngest daughter, Phoebe.”

Phoebe let go of her sister, keeping one arm around her waist while
she extended the other. “A pleasure, truly.” She shook hands with both of them and then turned to Ms. Hamilton, who was in the act of handing her drink to the elder Janeway.

“When do I get my hug?” Ms. Hamilton asked, opening her arms. Phoebe lost no time detaching herself and launching her body into her sister-in-law’s arms instead.

“Right now,” she said, laughing. “GOD this is wonderful. You feel fabulous!”

Ms. Hamilton laughed as well, lifting Phoebe Janeway right off her feet. “So do you, shrimp.”

“Hey! I’m not a shrimp. That’s Kathryn.”

“You are to me.” Ms. Hamilton bent backward, lifting Phoebe even more before suddenly straightening and depositing her back on the ground. Holding a hand on top of Phoebe’s head, she grinned and said, “Yep. Shrimpy.”

“Kathryn put you up to this, didn’t she?”

“I didn’t need to.” Captain Janeway was holding her drink again, still smiling at her sister. “Sorry, Phoebe, but the old nickname just lost its power. You may have four centimeters on me, but Lynne’s got about fourteen on you.”

“They grew ‘em tall back then, didn’t they?” Phoebe knocked Ms. Hamilton’s hand off her head and hugged her again. “I’m really, really, really glad you’re here.”

“I’m really glad to be here, believe me.” Ms. Hamilton rested her chin atop Phoebe’s head. “Thanks for all those letters,” she said softly. “They helped a lot.”

Phoebe pushed up on tiptoe and kissed her cheek. “You’re welcome.”

“Phoebe.” Captain Janeway’s grin was gone as she stepped up to them. She put a hand on her sister’s shoulder, opened her mouth, then shut it again and ducked in to kiss her cheek. “Thank you from me as well.”

“I can certainly see where your loyalties lie,” said Phoebe half-jokingly, but her eyes were suspiciously shiny.

“Damn straight.” Captain Janeway lifted her glass in salute and took a sip. “You look fantastic, by the way. Obviously the itinerant artist life agrees with you.”

“I’m not itinerant.”

“Only because I give her free housing,” said Gretchen Janeway.
“Hey, can I help it if my paychecks don’t come regularly? At least when they do come, they’re big ones.”

Alison was having so much fun watching them that she hadn’t realized until that moment what she was intruding on.

“Aunt Alynna, shall we leave the Janeways to their reunion?” she asked.

“Oh god, don’t go,” said Gretchen Janeway. “If you do that somebody else will step in. Stay a while and protect us from the politicking.”

“You won’t be able to escape it for long,” said the Admiral.

“No,” agreed Ms. Janeway. “But we’ll take what we can get.”

They didn’t get much; within five minutes their group had been joined by two more admirals and a senator. At that point Alison excused herself and walked back to the bar for a refill. As she waited for her order she saw President Gutierrez make his way over to the Janeways, a genial smile on his face as he shook hands with Lynne Hamilton. Alison rolled her eyes; she could hardly believe the man had the balls to make nice with them after trying his best to order Janeway into a suicidal act and then have her court-martialed when she refused. To look at him now, one would think he’d been their biggest fan from the start.

But not to look at Ms. Hamilton, she realized. The others in the group were long used to hiding their true feelings, but Ms. Hamilton clearly did not have the practice. She was regarding the President as if he were something nasty on the bottom of her shoe, and Alison found herself smiling at the sight. The woman really was a neophyte in politics.

It was going to be a shame to see that change.
“I can’t believe we’re actually here.” Kathryn watched the familiar landscape beneath their hovercraft, her body tingling with the recognition of every familiar hill, field and farmhouse. Uninhibited by clouds, the three-quarter moon lit up the snowy scene with a cold majesty. Every single tree and bush seemed to stand out in sharp relief.

“Ha,” said Revi. “You think you’re in denial? This time two years ago I was on an ex-Borg colony in the Delta Quadrant. If you’d told me I’d be flying over Indiana cornfields now I’d have laughed in your face.”

“Don’t start that contest with me in the hovercraft,” said Lynne. “You know I’ll win.”

“Good point.”

“I’m just happy to be out of that reception,” said Gretchen from the pilot’s seat. “What a thing to inflict on a crew that just wanted to get the rest of the way home.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Mom,” said Kathryn. “Not everyone was as unimpressed with it as we were. A lot of the lower decks crew were probably thrilled to mingle with captains and admirals and Starfleet’s Commander-in-Chief, not to mention the President of the Federation.”

“And to have their families see them in that kind of company,” added Lynne.
“Not to mention the networking possibilities,” said Revi. “What?” she asked as Kathryn scowled at her.

“I’d like to get through one evening without thinking about my crew being stripped, if you don’t mind.”

“Love,” said Lynne gently, “they’re not necessarily your crew anymore.”

“They are to me. I’ll thank you not to disabuse me of that just yet.”

“How about after you’ve had a few days of home cooking and nothing to do except sit by the fire and read a good book?” asked Gretchen.

Kathryn smiled at the thought of it. “That sounds like paradise.” She felt a sudden chill as they passed the MacGruder’s farmhouse, followed swiftly by full-sized stomach butterflies when they approached and then flew over the line of Lombardy poplars that marked the edge of the MacGruder property. They were now flying over Janeway land.

She reached for Lynne’s hand. “We’re here, sweetheart,” she said in a voice that was not entirely steady. “This is home. These are the fields I grew up in.”

Lynne squeezed her hand. “Take me for a walk tomorrow?”

“Count on it. After we sleep until noon.”

The craft was quiet as they flew the final kilometer, and when the Janeway farmhouse came into view, Kathryn’s breath stalled in her throat. This whole flight felt like a dream. How could everything be so unchanged after all this time? Especially when she herself felt so different?

“Hell of a playground you grew up in, love.”

“I know. I had a pretty magical childhood.”

Gretchen settled the hovercraft in the yard and switched off the engines. “Revi, Seven, the guest house is all ready for you. But I’d like to invite you in for a hot drink before you leave us for the evening.”

“We’d love that,” said Revi.

“Thank you, Gretchen,” Seven added.

“Good. Leave your bags here and we’ll get them on the way over.”

Kathryn hopped out onto the cleared path, the ice-cold air effortlessly penetrating all the way to the bottom of her lungs. “Indiana in January. I forgot what the air feels like.” She stood still, absorbing each breath with awe.

“Mountains have a distinctive odor?” asked Seven, coming around from her side of the craft. She was walking carefully, her head swiveling as she observed the mounded snow to either side of the path.

“Oh yes,” said Lynne. “Come skiing with Kathryn and me and you’ll find out.”

“Ooh, skiing,” said Revi. “I haven’t done that in about seventy years.”

A bark sounded from inside the house, and Kathryn’s head snapped up. “Is that Molly?”

“Yes,” said Gretchen, leading the group to the porch steps. As they climbed up, she added, “Remember, Kathryn, she’s not the same dog you left behind. Don’t be surprised if she’s a bit creaky in the joints.”

“I know, Mom. Don’t worry.”

They stood in a clump on the wide wooden porch as Gretchen tapped the door’s keypad. The door slid open with a slight shhuss sound, and instantly a red furry body filled the space, sniffing at her legs. Kathryn felt her throat tighten at the sight of Molly, who was waving her tail in the dignified fashion of a matriarch.

“Hi, Molly,” murmured Gretchen, scratching the soft, floppy ears. “I brought someone home for you.”

“Molly!” Kathryn said.

Molly’s tail stopped in mid-wave. She looked up, then pushed her head past Gretchen’s legs and peered out with rheumy eyes. Kathryn dropped her bag with a thump and bent down, her hands on her thighs. “Molly, sweetie, it’s me.”

Molly shoved past Gretchen, nearly knocking her off her feet, and dashed up to sniff Kathryn’s legs, hands, and face.

“Hello, old friend,” Kathryn whispered, running her hands over the silky coat. “I see you’ve had a bath for company. But I’m not company. Do you remember me?”

With a shrill, yelping bark, Molly launched herself upward into Kathryn’s arms. Unprepared for thirty kilograms of squirming dog, Kathryn stumbled backwards and Molly landed back on the porch. Undaunted, the old dog jumped up again and again, wriggling and barking in a paroxysm of canine joy. By unspoken agreement, the women on the porch moved to the sides, making room for the pair, but it was still a confusion of frenzied dog and people and luggage. On impulse Kathryn ran down the steps, wanting more room for this reunion. At the bottom
she stopped and turned, nearly tripping over Molly who had been right at her heels. She bent over, trying to calm her frantic dog, but Molly would not be calmed. She landed from one leap only to launch another, trying desperately to lick Kathryn’s face, barking and yelping in a way that Kathryn couldn’t remember her ever doing before, not even in her puppy days. Worried about Molly’s excitement damaging her old joints, she finally caught the dog in mid-leap, hoping to restrain her until she slowed down. But Molly wouldn’t stop squirming, and Kathryn didn’t have enough traction on the slippery path. Unable to balance herself with her arms, she went over backwards, landing in a soft bank of snow with a delighted dog on top. Molly took gleeful advantage of their new position, and after half a minute of fending her off Kathryn gave up, dropping her arms and laughing as she accepted a thorough tongue bath. When Molly showed no signs of slowing down she finally sat up, holding off her wiggling dog and looking up at the wide-eyed women on the porch.

“I thought you said she was old and arthritic!” she called out.

“She is!” said Gretchen.

“Yeah, I haven’t seen her that active in three years,” added Phoebe. “I guess she missed you.”

“I guess she did,” said Kathryn, holding her hands on either side of Molly’s head. “And here I was worried you wouldn’t remember me,” she whispered.

Molly barked again, her jaw dropping slightly open in a dog smile, her breath condensing in the cold air as she stared with total adoration. Kathryn felt the tightness in her throat again, but this time she couldn’t push it back down. Wrapping her arms around her dog, the newly crowned hero of the Federation buried her face in soft fur and cried.
“What is in this?” asked Seven, holding up a corner of the oddly light comforter. Gretchen had just left them, after conducting a tour of the guest house, and she and Revi were preparing for sleep.

Revi looked at her from the other side of the bed. “A down comforter. It’s stuffed with goose down.”

“Goose down,” said Seven blankly, palpating the comforter with both hands. It was an interesting sensation.

“Meaning small, fluffy feathers.” Revi sent her an image. “Extremely insulating.”

“Fascinating,” said Seven, who would never have thought of using bird feathers for heat regulation.

“Mm hm.” Revi pulled the sheets down a little further and began divesting herself of her dress uniform. “And I can’t wait to dive in.”

As always, Seven stopped what she was doing to watch Revi undress. Though Revi did not meet her eyes, she saw the quirk of her mouth.

: Someday you won’t find this quite so fascinating. :

Seven smiled. : Someday my cortical implant will yield to entropy. I suspect the two events will be concurrent. :

That earned her a look that warmed her right down to her toes, and Seven basked in the sensation. From the beginning, she had consistently assured Revi of her confidence in their future, but not until recently had
her partner actually believed her. It made all the difference in the universe. No longer were her complimentary thoughts brushed aside or deflected; now Revi accepted them, and every time she did so Seven felt a deep contentment that she could neither define nor describe. At one time, such an inability to verbalize her emotions would have been frustrating, but now she understood that some emotions could not be held up to the light and dissected. They were too deeply imbedded in the human psyche to be separated out. They made her very Human, and she treasured their existence.

Revi hung her clothes in the closet and practically ran on tiptoe back to the bed. “Damn, this floor is freezing!” she said, hopping onto the high bed. She slid under the covers, pulled the comforter up to her chin and settled in happily. “Come on, my cold toes are waiting for you.”

“Your toes are never cold.” Seven took off her jacket and hung it up next to Revi’s.

“Darling, you’ve never felt my toes anywhere but on our lovely climate-controlled ship. I think you’re in for a surprise.”

Indeed, once Seven pulled off her boots she was startled by the speed at which the wooden floors drained her body heat. Now she understood Revi’s dash for the bed, and quickly followed her example. She’d barely had time to settle in before Revi scooted up against her.

“Gahh!” Seven yelped at the touch of icy cold feet. “Revi!”

“What?” asked Revi innocently.

Seven threw the covers back and reached for one of her partner’s feet. “How is this possible? Your nanoprobes should be regulating this. Are you ill?”

Revi laughed. “No. The nanoprobes regulate our body core temperatures, not necessarily our extremities. Welcome to life on a farm in winter. But please, keep doing that for as long as you want to,” she added as Seven began to rub the cold foot between her hands.

“It’s not a matter of wanting; it’s a matter of survival.” Seven shook her head. “I cannot understand how your feet became so cold so quickly.”

“Family trait.”

Seven looked back at her, then gently released the foot and slid back onto her side, pulling the covers close as they faced each other. : You’re regretting not inviting them. :
Seven understood. She had also had the option of inviting her Aunt Irene to the reception, but the idea of meeting her aunt for the first time in such a venue was unsettling. Actually, the idea of meeting her aunt at all was rather unsettling. In their single video contact, Irene had insisted on calling her Annika, which had brought up all sorts of unpleasant memories and insecurities.

Seventeen understood. She had also had the option of inviting her Aunt Irene to the reception, but the idea of meeting her aunt for the first time in such a venue was unsettling. Actually, the idea of meeting her aunt at all was rather unsettling. In their single video contact, Irene had insisted on calling her Annika, which had brought up all sorts of unpleasant memories and insecurities.

I’ll go with you to meet her if you come with me to meet my parents.

So you do want to go.

After seeing Kathryn with her family, I’m feeling like I should at least give mine a chance. But that doesn’t mean I’ll feel the same way tomorrow.

I know. I assume nothing.

Revi smiled at her. Sorry to be so inconsistent.

“Gahh!” Seven had not expected the sudden touch of still-freezing feet on her calves. “Why are they still so cold?”

“Because they have no external heat source.” Revi snuggled in, pushing her feet between Seven’s legs. “Now they do. Ahhh. Much better.”

Seven gritted her teeth until the initial shock faded. “Is it going to be like this every night?”

“Probably. Unless I get smart and wait until I’m already sitting on the bed to take off my boots and socks.” She laughed at Seven’s glare. “Nice. You’ve been learning from Kathryn. Have you noticed how warm everything else is, though?”

Now that she mentioned it, Seven did detect a measurable increase in her epidermal temperature. “Interesting. It feels as if the comforter itself is generating heat.”

“In a way, it is. It’s trapping and reflecting our body heat. That’s the joy of a down comforter.” Revi sent a bit of relevant data.

“Efficient,” Seven decided. “I like it.”

“Me too. I haven’t slept under one of these in a long time.”

“I don’t believe I ever have.”

Revi lifted her head and kissed her softly. We are a pair, aren’t we?

A very good one.

Smiling, Revi kissed her again, then rested her head on her shoulder. “It’s so strange not to hear the engines,” she whispered.
“I know.” Seven listened to the silence with something approaching awe. It was so quiet that she could almost hear the movement of air molecules against her eardrum. The vacuum of space wasn’t a great deal more silent than this. “I wonder how Kathryn is feeling about it?”

“I’d guess in one of two ways: she’s either lying awake thinking about how weird it is, or she’s dead asleep because it’s so familiar and soothing to her.”

“I hope she’s asleep. Lynne, too.”

“I wouldn’t count on that for Lynne. If this whole night has been strange for you and me, I can’t even imagine what it feels like for her. And having to do that little cloak-and-dagger hovercar switch can’t have helped.”

Seven tightened her arm around Revi. “Lynne is extremely adaptable. Kathryn says she ‘just takes things in stride.’”

“She is adaptable,” Revi agreed. “But she’s also good at hiding what she feels. They’re a hell of a pair.”


“God, the silence is fabulous.” Lynne hung up her jacket and shirt, then sat on the bed to take off her boots. “I never realized until now how I adapted to the constant sound of the warp drive on Voyager. Kind of like living on a busy street; after a while you don’t hear the cars anymore. But I’m more used to places like this.”

Kathryn was already huddled under the comforter, waiting impatiently for her warmer spouse to join her. “I’m a little less used to it than you at this point. Seven years of drive hum; I’m still hearing the echoes in my head.”

Lynne shucked her pants, folded them and dropped them at the side of the bed. “Brr. It’s been a long time since I had to strategize on how to get into bed with the least amount of heat loss.” She slipped under the covers and had barely gotten her head on the pillow before Kathryn wrapped herself around her, causing a sharp inhalation. “Jesus! How can you possibly be so cold already?”

“Mmm.” Kathryn snuggled in happily, resting her head on Lynne’s shoulder. “How can you be so warm?”

“Well, before my assimilation I’d have said it was a high metabolism
and good muscle tone. Now I’m not so sure. Doesn’t your mother know about things like central heating systems? They have those here, don’t they?”

“It’s still high metabolism, sweetheart. I don’t think you’re any warmer now than you were before. And yes, we have temperature regulation just like everyone else. But Mom doesn’t believe in keeping the house at the same temperature day and night. Traditionalists believe that it’s healthier for the body to adapt to change. And frankly, I’ve always loved sleeping in a cold room. As long as I have a warm enough bed, that is.”

“I understand that. I’m the same way.” Lynne settled the comforter around Kathryn’s shoulder, tucking it in. “And I can’t tell you how cool it is to see real down comforters. It never occurred to me that you’d still be using these.”

“Well, the down is real, but it didn’t come from geese.”

“All the better.”

They snuggled together in a companionable silence, their shared body heat quickly warming the bed to the point that Kathryn had to push down the comforter a few centimeters to keep from overheating.

“I still can’t believe we’re here,” she said quietly. “It’s just surreal.”

Lynne’s arm tightened around her, but she made no response. Kathryn shifted her head, seeing Lynne’s eyes open and staring at the ceiling. “Are you doing all right?” she asked.

“I suppose,” said Lynne. “To be honest, things have been surreal for me since the moment I woke up in sickbay and saw you in that new uniform.”

“I guess even coming back to twenty-fourth century Earth pales next to resurrection.”

Lynne met her eyes. “Everything does. You’re the thread holding me together right now. I focus on you because thinking about anything else just leads to insanity. So I’m really, really glad to be here right now. Gretchen is wonderful, and Phoebe is a total crackup, and the house is just beautiful—but the one thing I needed more than the rest was to be here with you. I’ve been counting the hours until we could sleep together again.”

“I was starting to resent your alcove, too.” Kathryn brushed her fingers over Lynne’s skin, savoring the smoothness and warmth. “Last night was a hard one.”
“I knew it would be. I felt so guilty about leaving you. At least when I’m regenerating, I’m out. No worries about waking up halfway through and not being able to get to sleep again. But I worried about you getting any sleep at all.”

“I got enough.”

A gentle hand stilled her wandering fingers. “You accessed my regeneration records at 0612. I know you didn’t get enough.”

Kathryn sighed. “No, I didn’t. But I’m a lot more hopeful about tonight.”

“Me too.” Lynne kissed her softly. “You feel fantastic. And I’m having one of those moments again.”

“Which moments?”

“The ones where I’m ridiculously proud to be the one holding you. My god, Kathryn. You’re bigger than the fucking President. There were probably thirty thousand people in that crowd who’d have sold their left kidney to be in this bed right now.”

“That would be awfully tight quarters.” Kathryn pulled her hand free and resumed her caresses, brushing across Lynne’s shoulder implant and smiling as the body beneath hers twitched. “And I have a thing about Borg implants, so that pretty much rules out the thirty thousand.”

“See, this is why I need you. No matter how weird everything else in my life might be, you’re still a dog. It’s like a universal constant.”

“I pride myself on consistency.” She brushed the implant again, then pushed herself up on one elbow, leaned over and began gently sucking on it.

“Oh god.” Lynne put a hand on the back of her head, holding her in place. “Are you sure you want to do this now?”

Kathryn took a break just long enough to say, “Actually, I wanted to do this at the reception. But I thought it might draw a crowd.” She resumed her sucking, bringing her free hand up to caress Lynne’s breast.

“It might draw a crowd in here, too. Gretchen is just down the hall.”

“Are you worried?”

“No…it’s just been a few years since I messed around with someone’s parents right down the hall.”

Kathryn snorted, which made Lynne’s body jerk, and they both broke up laughing.
“So, when was the last time?” asked Kathryn, resting her chin on Lynne’s chest.

“Mmmm…I guess that would have been Bobby Kirschfield.”

“Bobby? They actually named kids Bobby then?”

“No, they named them Robert. But nobody calls a sixteen-year-old boy Robert.”

“Sixteen, eh? You were an early bloomer.”

“Not really. There wasn’t much to mess around with. But Bobby was happy.”

“How about you?”

“I had a hard time not laughing when he dropped his pants. It was the funniest looking thing I’d ever seen in my life.”

“You didn’t tell him that, did you?”

“What do you think?”

“That poor boy,” said Kathryn, shaking her head in empathy.

Lynne grinned. “No, I didn’t…then. But later I told him my theory.”

“Well, you know how in Genesis it says that God created Adam and Eve from clay?” At Kathryn’s nod, she continued, “I figured if that was the story, then God must have had some clay left over when he was done. So he turned around and as he was walking away, he threw it over his shoulder. That’s where it landed. Splot.”

Kathryn covered her eyes and laughed. “And you told him this.”

“I thought it was a pretty reasonable theory. Don’t you think it explains everything? I mean, why else would it look so funny? It’s like an afterthought.”

Kathryn slid off Lynne’s body and rolled onto her back, still laughing. “You realize you scarred him for life,” she said, once she could breathe again.

“Come to think of it, I did hear later that he was gay. But I don’t think it was my influence. Are you going to tell me you didn’t think that was the strangest thing in the world when you first saw it?”

“I think my upbringing was a little different from yours. I’d already been studying xenobiology and alien anatomy by then. Human penises weren’t all that strange compared to some of the other things I’d seen holoimages of.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot—you saw everything in three-dimensional images. I
only had the drawings in my health sciences book to go by. They left a lot to be desired.” Lynne began to chuckle. “And then there was this one drawing that was designed to show how sensitive various parts of our bodies are, by making those parts proportionately larger. So it was a picture of a man with huge lips, and giant hands and feet, and this little tiny penis. The boys in class were horrified.”

“What did the picture of the woman look like?”

“Didn’t have one. Twentieth century, remember. Women didn’t appear in health books except for the requisite female reproduction diagram and the pictures of mothers nursing babies. Otherwise it was all about men.”

“God, what a backward time.” Kathryn rolled over and pushed back up on one elbow. “Well, if I were to draw such a picture of you, this would be enormous.” She gently ran her fingertips over Lynne’s chest implant. “And these would be just as big.” Her fingers moved from one nipple to the other, softly squeezing.

“Hm. I’d have odd-looking elbows, too.”

Kathryn chuckled. “True, at least the insides. And knees. And this soft skin on the inside of your biceps…”

“Don’t forget the lips.”

“Never,” whispered Kathryn, leaning in for a long, soft kiss. “And the earlobes,” she murmured, transferring her attention to the nearest one.

“Right.” Lynne’s breathing hitched.

“And the throat…” She moved down, kissing and then sucking on Lynne’s throat, gradually making her way to the underside of the jaw. “Did I mention the lips?” she asked, kissing her way over the top of the jaw.

“Can’t remember.”

Kathryn raised her head and smiled as she looked into dark green eyes. “Bullshit.”

The eyes crinkled in amusement. “You really know how to sweet talk a girl.”

“I learned from the best.”

Lynne wrapped her arms around Kathryn’s back and rolled them both over. “And I still have things to teach, so don’t be speaking in the past tense.”

Kathryn closed her eyes as Lynne kissed her, reveling in the slow, unhurried touch.
Past tense. No, she didn’t have to speak in the past tense about Lynne. It was probably the greatest irony in the universe that she had the Borg Queen to thank for it.

“So, did you learn anything worthwhile at the stuffed shirtfest?”

Alison had just touched the cup of tea to her lips, but at this she hastily removed it while she barked out a startled laugh. “I can’t believe you said that! Gretchen Janeway, yes, but not you.”

“The only difference between me and Gretchen Janeway is that she can say what she thinks during the reception, while I have to wait until afterwards.” Aunt Alyynna sipped her own tea with aplomb.

They were in the Admiral’s San Francisco apartment, having walked there after the reception. Alison was staying the night before returning to her Colorado home the next morning, an arrangement which saved her some late-night travel time and gave them the opportunity to speak without having to encrypt their conversation.

“I did get some time alone with Elise Hamilton and Charles Fornay before the reception started.”

“And?”

“It was…interesting. Charles was making lascivious comments about Captain Janeway, which is typical for him. He’s always on the make, but I think if any woman actually took him up on it he’d run the other way. He just likes the game.”

“Adele would divorce him on the spot and that would be the end of his life of ease and power. Besides which, Janeway would have him for lunch.”

“I know. I think that’s part of the appeal; he knows she’s untouchable so that makes her a safe target for his comments.”

“Did he say anything about Lynne Hamilton?”

“Just that he believes she’s the real thing. So does Elise. And Elise thinks Brian is in agreement, but he won’t say so until Ms. Hamilton proves her identity.” Alison took another sip. “Elise said something interesting, though. She feels sorry for Ms. Hamilton because of her time displacement and what she’s stepping into…but when I suggested that perhaps it was their job to help protect her, she said Ms. Hamilton only
shares their name. It doesn’t make her their family. She was quite cool about it.”

“That is interesting. Separation of emotion.”

“Are you thinking that would be necessary if she were the one trying to remove Ms. Hamilton?”

“Only if she had any feelings of regret to begin with. What about Brian?”

Alison sighed. “I never managed to get him alone; somebody was always coming up to talk to him. And of course he’d never mention anything about Ms. Hamilton in public. Not until her identity is proven. Adele had a few things to say, but none of it was very helpful. She’s unhappy about the identity proof being a closed meeting; she says if the leadership of the Foundation is going to change hands, it should do so in front of the full board, not just the officers. But I think she’s just put out by the fact that Charles will be there for it and she won’t. Brian didn’t exactly earn her everlasting love by backing her husband’s election as an officer and not her own.”

“Adele is a socialite and Brian is a smart man who doesn’t let family ties get in the way of good business decisions,” said Aunt Alynna. “Charles actually does the job; she would have been in it for the increased exposure. Besides, she’s assuming the leadership will change hands. The moment Lynne Hamilton’s identity is proven, she’ll only be taking over her own trust fund, not the Foundation. Not unless she wants it. Do you think she does?”

“Based on the messages we’ve sent back and forth, no. But she feels it’s her responsibility. After all, her parents left instructions for her to take the Chair’s position.”

“That’s a heavy responsibility. And even if she does take over leadership, she’ll still need the existing board for a while, especially the officers. She’ll have a steep learning curve. Nothing will change immediately.”

“I think Brian knows that. Ever since that first meeting when he dropped this on me, he’s been calm about the whole thing. But then Brian is calm about everything.”

Her aunt nodded. “The few times I’ve dealt with him, he was the consummate businessman.”

A comfortable silence fell on the room as they sipped their tea and looked out the expansive windows at the San Francisco skyline.
“I’ll be so glad when Ms. Hamilton takes over her trust fund,” said Alison.

“And you think she’ll be safe then?”

She looked at her aunt in surprise. “You think she won’t? Whoever was trying to kill her was only doing it to keep her from claiming the fund. Once she signs the transfer, there’s no motive anymore.”

“There is if she dismisses the current fund managers. Or if there’s any concern that she might dismiss her fund managers.”

“Sweet Mary.” Alison rested her head on the back of her chair. “I don’t know why, but I never thought of that. This whole time I’ve just been counting down the days until it was over.” She met her aunt’s eyes again. “She’s going to need to put a legal policy in place that specifies the management of her fund in the event of death. If it becomes abundantly clear that her death would result in the reassignment or dissolution of her funds, with no benefit whatsoever to her managers, that should be all the insurance she needs.”

“Sounds like what she needs is someone who knows her way around legal contracts.”

“That’s a little problematic, Aunt Alynna. I’m not her employee yet. Until her identity is proven, my working with her could be a conflict of interest.”

“Do you work for the Board of Directors, or for the Foundation? Seems to me you work for one and report to the other.”

Alison sighed. “I’ll call her tomorrow.”
It was the aroma that woke Kathryn. Without an alarm or her internal sense of having to be somewhere, she had apparently managed to sleep well into the morning—it was too light in the room to be much earlier than 1000. She knew what she’d find when she rolled over, but it was still a disappointment to see an empty bed. Judging by the cold sheets, Lynne had been gone a while. That wasn’t unusual; since her assimilation she’d rarely required more than four hours of sleep per night. But Kathryn couldn’t help feeling a little bereft this morning. It would have been so nice to lie here and snuggle with her.

Then again, there was that wonderful smell. She closed her eyes, savoring it. Fresh coffee, and bacon, and something baked—probably her mother’s homemade sticky buns. Oh, god, it smelled fantastic. This was something she’d dreamed of for years. Nothing from a replicator ever smelled like this.

She threw back the covers and knelt by her bag, pulling out a pair of flannel-lined jeans, a silky undershirt and a sweater. She’d replicated the winter clothes back in the Terellian system, when she was gleefully planning ahead for their arrival home. A lifetime ago, before Lynne had died.

The brisk air inspired great efficiency in dressing, and soon she was pulling on the thermal socks and waterproof ankle-high boots that would keep her feet warm no matter where she and Lynne went today. After a
quick hair brushing, she stepped out of the room and made her way downstairs.

The air temperature increased by degrees as she descended; as always, her mother kept the downstairs living quarters warmer than the upstairs. The kitchen was the warmest of all, heated by the stove and the oven, and the aromas were heavenly. She rounded the corner to find Lynne, Phoebe and her mother all sitting at the table with empty plates and steaming cups in front of them.

“Told you that would bring her down,” said Phoebe smugly.

“Were you laying odds that I wouldn’t respond to my first real bacon and fresh buns in seven years?” Kathryn walked straight to the stove, plucking a still-warm piece of bacon from the cooling rack. “Can’t imagine anyone would have taken you up on it.” She crunched the bacon between her teeth and nearly swooned. “Oh, I need more of that,” she said, grabbing a plate from the counter and loading it up. A chair scraped and Gretchen appeared beside her, pulling a frying pan off the overhead rack.

“Don’t stuff yourself on that; I have pancake batter and scrambled eggs, too. We were just waiting for you to come down.”

Kathryn turned to eye the empty plates on the table. “Haven’t you already eaten?”

“Nope.” Lynne pushed her chair back and joined her at the counter. “We just had a few pieces of bacon to tide us over. You look great in that sweater,” she added, wrapping an arm around her waist and dropping a soft kiss on her forehead.

Kathryn put her plate down and tugged Lynne closer, taking a moment to simply absorb her warmth and presence. “You look great in my mom’s kitchen,” she said, resting her head on Lynne’s shoulder. “Why didn’t you wake me up if you were all waiting to eat?”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I wanted to,” said Phoebe from the table. “But your bodyguard wouldn’t let me.”

“You needed a good night’s sleep for once,” said Lynne, squeezing Kathryn before pulling back and looking into her eyes. “We would have waited until noon if that’s what it took. And none of us wanted to have our first breakfast without you.”

“I did,” said Phoebe.

“She’s full of shit,” said Lynne as Kathryn glared at her sister.
“I know,” said Kathryn. “A lot of things have changed, but that’s immutable.”

“Well, now that you’re up,” said Gretchen, “why don’t you run over to the guest house and bring Seven and Revi back?”

“Can I get a cup of coffee first?”

“I’ll go,” said Lynne. “You sit and have your coffee.”

“No way. I’m not missing your first sight of my childhood home in daylight.” Kathryn released her wife and opened the cupboard where the cups and glasses had always been kept. They were still in the same place, to her relief, and tucked in the back was something she’d hoped to find: her old Academy travel cup. With a small sound of satisfaction she pulled it out and held it up. “You kept it.”

Gretchen looked at her with an odd downturn to her mouth, then nodded shortly and turned away. “Yes, I did,” she said, reaching into the refrigeration unit. By the time she turned around again, a bowl in each hand, her expression had evened out. “As you said, some things are immutable.”

Kathryn stepped forward and kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you.” Their eyes met for a moment before both women made themselves busy elsewhere. Kathryn glanced around for the coffeepot, only to find Lynne already holding it up for her.

“One for the road?” she asked.

“Please.” Kathryn popped the lid on the cup and held it out.

“Say when.”

“When.” With a smile, she pressed the lid back on and took her first sip. “Oh, yes,” she murmured.

“What the hell does that mean?” asked Phoebe. “Say when?”

“It means stop pouring.” Kathryn took another sip, savoring the incredible flavor as it slid down her throat.

“Well, I figured that much out. But why when?”

“Ask her.” Kathryn tilted her head toward Lynne. “God, Mom, this is fantastic.”

“Glad you’re enjoying it.” Gretchen smiled as she pulled more bowls out of the refrigeration unit. “I bought it in town just before leaving to meet you.”

“It’s something we always said in my day,” Lynne told Phoebe. “I think it’s just shorthand for ‘tell me when to stop.’ Kathryn thought it was
pretty odd too, but she’s adapted. Except that she always takes it literally.

“You two are both a bit odd,” said Phoebe.

“You don’t know the half of it,” said Kathryn. “Ready to tromp out in the snow?”

Lynne nodded. “Sure. Do I need a coat?”

“Is it windy outside, Mom?”

“No. Not a breath of air moving.”

“You don’t need a coat. Come on, let’s go get Molly.” She headed down the hall toward the living room, where Molly’s bed was now located. Last night’s display notwithstanding, Molly found it difficult to get up and down the staircase these days. Her bed had been in the living room for a couple of years now.

Molly was dead asleep, her paws resting on the edge of the bed and her head hanging a little over the side. Kathryn knelt beside her and gently rubbed her ears. “Hey, girl. Want to go for a walk?”

Molly’s ears pricked first, then her eyes opened wide and she struggled to her feet, taking her time for a long, careful stretch before prancing around and wagging her tail like a puppy. With a glad bark she jumped up, licking at Kathryn’s face, and Kathryn found herself having to calm her dog all over again while holding her coffee out of harm’s way.

“Did she forget last night?” asked Lynne, taking the cup out of her hand.

“Maybe.” Kathryn wrapped her arms around Molly and just held her. “Calm down, girl. I’m still here. I’m not going off planet for a while, okay?”

Molly wriggled and squirmed, trying to twist around and get a lick in, but she soon settled down and sat with a thump, her plumy tail sweeping the floor.

“Good girl.” Kathryn dropped a kiss on her furry forehead. “Want to go play in the snow?” As she rose, Molly instantly rose with her, trotting out into the hallway. Kathryn and Lynne followed, finding her standing at the front door with a waving tail and expectant air.

“You realize that you’re not kissing me with those lips,” said Lynne, handing her cup back.

Kathryn took it and made exaggerated kissing motions, laughing as Lynne backed away. “Oh, come on. A little fuzz never hurt anyone.”
“It’s not the fuzz, it’s the drool. Ick.”
“I didn’t kiss her on the mouth.”
“No, but she kissed you on yours.”

Kathryn opened the door, watching Molly shoot out like a furry projectile as she and Lynne followed more sedately. She stopped at the top step, one arm around Lynne’s waist, simply breathing the crisp air and taking in the scene. She could feel the air going all the way to the bottom of her lungs with every breath, and warmed her throat with a sip of hot coffee. The contrasting physical sensations were so familiar that it made her heart ache.

Beside her, Lynne took a deep breath and sighed happily. “Clean air, snow, and a horizon. Lovely.”
“I thought you might like it.”
“Well, it’s kind of flat, but other than that it’s nice.” Lynne tugged her closer.

“Do you think you could be happy in a flat landscape?”
“Honestly? I don’t know. I’ve never lived in a flat place before. But then, I’d never lived in a starship before and that worked out pretty well.”
“You had no alternatives then. Now you do. We could live anywhere, Lynne. As long as we’re close to a transport site, distance doesn’t matter.”

Lynne stared out at the snowy scene, her eyes narrowed against the glare. “There’s an idea that takes some getting used to—truly being able to live anywhere.”

“We have to make a decision at some point, though it’s certainly not anything pressing. I still have an apartment in San Francisco, thanks to Mom, but we couldn’t take it until the current lease runs out in September. Even if I could legally do it, I’d never throw someone out of their home just because I want it back. I love it here—and definitely want to stay for a while—but I also know that at some point this house will not be big enough for two adult Janeways.”

“Or three,” said Lynne. “Gretchen says Phoebe is practically a resident.”

“Even worse. So, keeping in mind that our only limitation is proximity to a transport site, where would you want to live?”

“Where would you want to live?”

“Ah ah. I asked first. And you’ve been in my home for the past two years, so I think your desires count for more right now.”
I’d disagree with that. But just off the top of my head...I’d say western Colorado. My old stomping grounds. But I don’t know what it looks like anymore. How much has it changed? Too much and I wouldn’t want to go back. Not enough and that might hurt, too.”

Kathryn rubbed her side. “I understand. Maybe we should go take a look.”

The ribs under her hand expanded. “I’d like that,” Lynne said softly.

“Well, since we’re going to Denver to meet the Foundation people anyway, why not just plan to stay for a few days? You said you wanted to go skiing.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think we’d have time. Aren’t you the slave of Starfleet right now? Can you get away so soon after coming home?”

“Admiral Necheyev gave me two weeks, provided that I’m always within range if she needs to call me back to clarify my debriefings so far. After that I’ll be in debriefing hell again, not to mention the publicity tour.”

“Two weeks? You didn’t tell me that!”

“I didn’t have time until now. She told me at the end of our last debriefing yesterday. We’ve been kind of busy since then.”

“Pfft.” Lynne waved her hand in dismissal. “I do believe we’ve shared a bed since then.”

“I know, but I was focusing on other things.” She saw the half-smile forming on Lynne’s face, and knew she was forgiven.

“Actually, I’m surprised they don’t have you sitting in media interviews as we speak,” Lynne commented. “Strike while the iron is hot, you know?”

Kathryn furrowed her brow. “No. I don’t know. What the hell does that mean?”

“Um...okay, back when blacksmiths made iron tools and whatnot by hand, they had to heat the iron to make it malleable first, right?”

“Riiiight...” Kathryn wasn’t getting it yet.

“So they’d heat a rod of iron, and then pull it out of the fire and start shaping it. By hitting it with a hammer. But the shaping could only happen as long—”

“As the iron was red hot, got it,” finished Kathryn. “That’s a new one. So I’m iron?”

“Oh no, love, you’re duranium alloy. I was talking about the situation.
Voyager just landed, about ninety zillion people saw it live all over the Federation, your name and face have been on the FedComm for weeks already...surely everyone in this quadrant wants to know more about you right now.”

“Ugh. Well, I’m sure it was suggested. But Necheyev said that Starfleet recognizes that I might need to ‘decompress,’ as she put it.”

“My god, someone at Starfleet is being sensible?”

“Sarcasm doesn’t become you, sweetheart.”

“Then I guess I’ll keep trying until it does.” Lynne glanced sideways at her. “I think they want to make certain you’re not going to have some sort of meltdown in front of the press. Very bad for public relations, that.”

“Maybe. But I have my own theory.”

“What’s that?”

“I think they’re hoping to wrap up the Maquis issue before they launch the publicity blitz.”

Lynne scowled. “Jesus. How long does it take? They’ve had half a damn year already! Politicians are just as slow in your time as they were in mine. I thought there’d be some improvement.”

“Human nature doesn’t change that much in a few hundred years.”

“So I see.”

“Anyway, I have time. I just need to be back for the publicity tour. Besides, Starfleet owes me a shipload of leave; if I really wanted to get away they’d be hard pressed to say no. It helps that Necheyev knows you’re the key to Starfleet’s continued funding. She wants to stay on your good side.”

“Oh yeah. Forgot about that.”

“You did?” asked Kathryn in surprise.

“No. I just wish I did.”

There was nothing to say to that, so Kathryn contented herself with sipping her coffee as they watched Molly finish her tour of the yard. After sniffling at the tip of a shrub that was nearly buried in snow, Molly walked back to the bottom of the steps and waited. Clearly she was ready to go.

“So you’re not turned on by dog drool, eh?” Kathryn asked. From the corner of her eye she saw Lynne’s smile.

“Not particularly, no.”

“You realize that Molly has a cleaner mouth than I do.”
“Oh, come on. That was a myth four hundred years ago; haven’t you people gotten smarter since then? Dog mouths carry just as big a bacteria load as human mouths.”

“Yes, but the bacteria are different.”

“And that makes it so much better.” Lynne’s voice dripped with disgust, and Kathryn laughed as she closed her cup again.

“Come on, Miss Hygiene. Let’s go find our shipmates.” She led the way down the stairs, past the front of the hovercraft and around the side of the house, where the guest house came into view fifty meters away. “Look at this,” she said, shaking her head as she stepped into the narrow path. “Mom is still shoveling snow.”

“So?” asked Lynne from behind her. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing except that she’s at an age now where nobody would fault her for giving up just a little of her Traditionalist tendencies. She could have vaporized the snow in a few minutes. It probably took her an hour to shovel this.”

“Or it took Phoebe an hour,” Lynne pointed out. “Besides, you know as well as I do that physical activity is the best recipe for a long life. If your mom is still shoveling snow, then I say good for her.”

“I know. I just worry. She’s older than I remember.”

“So are you.”

“Thanks.”

Molly trotted up the path ahead of them, looking over her shoulder every few steps to make sure Kathryn was still there. When they arrived at the porch steps she walked up carefully, then stood at the top and watched them with a gently waving tail. As Kathryn neared the top step, Molly bumped her hand with her nose, soliciting a petting.

“Yes, you’re still just as beautiful as ever,” Kathryn told her, scratching her ears and the top of her head. Molly tilted her head happily, her eyes half-closed, then opened them wider as Lynne stepped up to the porch next to her. Kathryn straightened and Molly immediately bumped Lynne’s hand, but was disappointed when that earned her nothing more than a pat on the head. She licked Lynne’s hand, a clear message that she was seeking more, but Lynne just wiped the hand off on her pants and stepped around Kathryn.

“So what’s the protocol these days?” she asked. “Do we knock?”
“You don’t have much experience with dogs, do you? She was asking you for a little attention.”
“I know. But you’re the one she really wants.”
“Lynne, she’s a dog. She wants attention from everyone.”
“So ‘dog’ is synonymous with ‘attention whore’?”
“Well, I wouldn’t put it quite that crudely, but…yes. And she’s old and creaky, so be nice to her.”
“I was nice. I petted her.”
“You call that a pet?” Kathryn turned to Molly and gave her a good two-handed scratching, making sure she got all the itchy places behind the ears and along the throat. “This is a petting.”
“Fine. I’m knocking now.”
Kathryn laughed as Lynne gave a smart series of raps to the door. “It’s okay,” she told Molly. “We’ll get her trained.”
The door opened, revealing Revi in jeans and a red sweater that set off her dark hair. “Hi,” she said with a smile. “I see you’re finally awake. Is it breakfast time?”
Seven appeared behind her, and Kathryn’s eyes widened at the sight of her very proper Astrometrics officer in casual clothes. Not that she wasn’t wearing the same thing herself, but on Seven the jeans and light blue sweater seemed so…exotic. Her loose hair just added to the effect.
“So you’ve all been waiting for me?” she asked as they came out onto the porch.
“Mm hm.” Revi latched the door behind Seven. “Don’t worry, your mom left some fresh fruit juice and breakfast rolls in the kitchen here. We were fine. And you really, really needed the sleep.” She examined Kathryn’s face critically, then smiled. “You look great.”
“Thank you.” Kathryn turned, embarrassed by the knowledge that everyone had apparently been keeping watch over her. “Shall we go have that breakfast you’ve all been waiting for?”
“I’m ready,” said Lynne. She hopped down the stairs and into the path, only to be shoved aside by Molly. “Sheesh. If you wanted to go first, all you had to do was say so.”
“She’s a dog,” said Revi. “They always want to go first. They’re kind of like captains that way.”
“Hey!” said Kathryn in mock outrage. “That is not true.”
“About dogs or about captains?”
“She’s right, Revi,” called Lynne from the front of their single-file line. “Sometimes I get to go first.”

“Okay, I didn’t need to know that,” said Revi, and Kathryn snorted. “Why is so much Human humor predicated on sex?” asked Seven.

“Because people like Revi get so embarrassed by it,” said Kathryn.

They trooped up the main house steps and into the entryway, where Kathryn directed everyone to leave their dripping shoes. “This is a shoes-off house when it’s wet outside,” she said. “Which is pretty much November through April. And then during the summer thunderstorm season, too.”

“Wise,” said Lynne as she sat on the shoe bench.

“Space is so much cleaner,” said Seven, looking with distaste at her snow-covered boots.

“Oh, but Seven, there’s so much fun to be had in this messy snow,” said Lynne with a grin.

Gretchen welcomed them into her kitchen, where the scrambled eggs and pancakes were already cooking, and soon all six women were sitting around the table with piles of food in front of them. The women from Voyager were loud in their appreciation, and Seven was clearly astonished at the flavors. She peppered Gretchen with questions about seasonings and spices, and was taken aback at how simple the meal really was.

“If you have good basic ingredients, you don’t need fancy spices,” Gretchen told her. “Those spices are wonderful at the right time and place, but for the everyday meals, just use high quality, fresh ingredients.”

“Gods, Kathryn, you ate like this for your entire childhood?” asked Revi.

“Mm hm.” Kathryn was busy forking in a bite of fluffy pancakes dripping with maple syrup. “And I was embarrassed about my Traditionalist mother who wouldn’t use a replicator.”

“Well, you were an idiot.”

“I know. I didn’t want to be different.”

Revi, Seven and Lynne all laughed at that, leaving Gretchen and Phoebe blinking in confusion.

“She’s one of a kind and proud of it,” explained Lynne. “None of us can imagine a Kathryn who just wanted to fit in and not be noticed.”

“Remember how pissed she was over the con artist who impersonated her?” asked Revi, and they all laughed again, which led to a retelling of
how two Delta Quadrant thieves had impersonated Kathryn and Tuvok, using their ‘Federation’ credentials to bilk all sorts of unwitting victims.

“You should have seen them squaring off in the brig,” said Lynne. “I watched the security logs. Here’s this woman behind the force field with a bad wig that’s styled just like Kathryn’s hair, and a captain’s uniform that’s not quite right—”

“With the extra large commbadge,” added Kathryn, and they laughed again.

“Yeah, the commbadge was a dead giveaway; it was three times the size of ours. So Kathryn walks up to the force field, and they size each other up...and then Kathryn says, ‘Nice hair.’”

Revi picked up the narrative. “And the imposter said she’d expected the great Captain Janeway to be...taller.”

“Oh, it got worse,” said Lynne. “Then she said, ‘I make a better you than you.’ You should have seen Kathryn after that. Hell hath no fury like a woman badly imitated.”

“What happened to her?” asked Gretchen.

“Kathryn set up a sting, with the help of Neelix, Tom Paris and the Doctor,” said Lynne. “She let the thief think she was escaping the brig, when in reality she was just leading us right to her own ship. Tom and the Doctor waited until she contacted her ship and arranged to be beamed aboard, and then they knocked her out. It was actually the Doctor who beamed on board—in the guise of the thief.”

“Except he did a much better imitation of her than she did of Kathryn,” said Revi.

“He even had the bad wig right,” added Kathryn.

“And got them to lead us right to their stash of stolen goods,” said Lynne. “We returned everything and saved the Federation’s tattered reputation.”

“And the thieves went to the closest world they’d victimized,” said Kathryn. “I figured their various victims could argue over extradition all they wanted to; I wasn’t sticking around for that. But I always did wonder who got them in the end.”

“I think that was you, love,” said Lynne, and they all broke up laughing, with Seven joining a half-second after the rest. Kathryn knew she’d
had to translate the double meaning, but the fact that she found it amusing said worlds about her progress.

“So where is everyone going today?” asked Gretchen later, as they were all relaxing with cups of coffee, tea or hot chocolate.

“I'm taking Lynne on the Great Childhood Tour,” said Kathryn. “Seven, Revi, you're welcome to come along if you'd like.”

“Oh, no,” said Phoebe. “She's going to drag you through fields and over hill and dale in the snow. Go to town and take in a few art galleries, for heaven’s sake. You’ll have more fun and you’ll be warmer.”

“I wish to accompany you,” said Seven, meeting Kathryn’s eyes. “You made me a promise. I've waited two years and nine months to see your home.”

“I remember that promise,” said Kathryn. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than keeping it today.”

“Will you show me the world’s biggest ditch as well?” asked Seven with a smile.

“What’s that?” asked Lynne. “Some sort of giant irrigation system?”

“A canyon system in Arizona,” Seven informed her. Lynne’s mouth dropped open as she turned on Kathryn.

“You told Seven the Grand Canyon was the world's biggest ditch?!”

Phoebe and Gretchen laughed at the expression on Kathryn’s face. “She got that from her father,” said Gretchen. “That’s what he called it.”

“Well, with all due respect to him, that’s terrible.” Lynne turned back to Seven. “Don’t let her take you. She’s clearly not qualified. I'll take you there and I promise you will see magic, Seven. Even if you didn’t have any interest in geology you’d love the geometry in the erosion patterns. Did you know that the rock formations exposed at the bottom are two billion years old?”

“Really?” asked Seven in interest. “That’s forty-four percent of this planet’s life span. It's unusual to have exposed rock of that relative age.”

“My point,” said Lynne, sitting back.

“I'll go with you,” Seven decided.


“You’re invited too,” said Lynne. “We'll leave the ditch lovers here in Indiana.”
“Hold on now,” said Kathryn. “I’ll have you know I hiked the north rim with my father when I was nine.”

“Yeah? Did he show you the sprinkler system?”

Gretchen threw her head back and laughed as Kathryn leveled a sadly ineffective Glare O’ Death at her wife. “Oh, lord,” Gretchen chuckled. “You two really are made for each other. You either had to fall in love or kill each other. I’m glad it was the former.”

“It’s not too late for the latter,” said Kathryn.
Seven was still having a difficult time with the fact that she was actually crunching through snow-covered fields in Bloomington, Indiana. When Kathryn had first promised to bring her to this place, it had been a nearly empty guarantee, backed only by Kathryn’s refusal to accept any possibility but a return home. But even then Seven had believed.

And now here she was, breathing air that felt and smelled and tasted different from any she had personally experienced before…and hearing things from Kathryn that gave her an entirely new view of her friend and captain. The whole situation was unreal.

“There it is,” said Kathryn, pointing ahead to a small knoll topped by a single massive willow tree. “My childhood refuge. That was my hideaway right up until the day I entered Starfleet Academy.”

“And after,” said Revi. “I heard stories.”

“Me too,” said Lynne. “I seem to recall that a certain Commander Janeway came to this tree when she got her promotion to captain.”

“That’s a story I’d better not hear from any other source,” said Kathryn as they continued toward the knoll. “Lifelong imprisonment is still an option under Starfleet code, you know.”

“Oh, come on, Kathryn. You just told us about trying to walk more than thirty kilometers home through a thunderstorm after losing a tennis match, because you didn’t think you deserved the transport.” Lynne
reached out for her hand. “After that, knowing that you sat in a tree when you made captain seems kind of…normal.”

“Normal is relative,” said Seven.

“You would know better than any of us, darling.” Revi’s smile was so bright and easy that Seven found herself smiling in response.

“I disagree,” she said. “Every one of us is normal relative to our chosen friends and partners. But we are not normal relative to what I know of the average Earth resident.”

“Especially the average resident in the Indiana Agricultural Park,” said Kathryn. “You’re right, Seven. We’re a rather unusual bunch. That’s why I’m so glad you and Revi came here with us. It’s…comforting to have friends nearby who understand.”

Revi nodded. “I was glad for your invitation, for the same reason. I’m just not ready to talk to people who require explanations.”

“I know what you mean,” said Lynne. “But I’m not going to have much of a choice about it.”

Conversation ceased as they began the slippery climb up the knoll, but Seven suspected they were all thinking about the same thing: Lynne’s appearance before the Hamilton Foundation board officers. The appointment had been set before they’d arrived at Earth. She knew her friend wasn’t looking forward to it, but the board was anxious to get the identity issue settled. The problem was that as soon as Lynne accepted her trust fund, she would also have to accept responsibility for the Foundation itself—which meant becoming a very public person.

They arrived at the top of the knoll and paused by unspoken agreement. The willow tree was an enormous specimen, its sweeping branches covering nearly the entire level surface and so thick that almost nothing could be seen through them. Once they leafed out in the spring, they would be impenetrable. Seven understood why Kathryn had called it a hideaway; unless someone had known her location, they would never have found her by visual search alone.

Kathryn moved forward, parting the drooping branches with both hands and ducking through. The others followed, and Seven soon found herself able to stand upright at the center of a constricted world. Compared to the glare of sun on snow, the light that filtered through these branches was soft and dim, and the density of the surrounding
branches gave the impression of a place entirely removed from the fields they’d just walked through.

The sound of scraping bark drew her attention, and her eyes widened at the sight of her dignified captain climbing up the tree. She knew from her studies that tree climbing was a nearly universal experience of human childhood—at least, for those children growing up in temperate climates—but it was supposedly an activity limited to children. Not adult Starfleet captains.

: What was that you were just saying about relative normality, Seven? :

She glanced at Revi to see another of those easy smiles. : You’re so relaxed here. :

: Hard not to be. You are, too. I think we’re absorbing it through osmosis; maybe just because it’s so damn quiet. :

“Coming, Seven?”

Seven turned to Lynne, who was standing by the tree trunk with an eyebrow raised in challenge. “Coming where?” she asked ingenuously.

“I know for a fact you’ve never climbed a tree in your life. Now is the time.”

“The fact that I have no memory of it does not preclude the possibility. I may have climbed a tree before my assimilation.”

“If you can’t remember it, it doesn’t count.”

“Come on, Seven,” Kathryn said from her perch. “I’ve been waiting a long time to see you up here.”

It was an invitation Seven found impossible to refuse. She walked to the base of the tree, eyed the growth patterns on the trunk for a moment, and reached up for the lowest branch. The wood was rough beneath her palms as she swung herself to the next foothold, and a moment later she was standing beside Kathryn in the wide, curved space created by a fork in the main trunk.

“This was my thinking spot,” said Kathryn, dropping to a crouch and then sitting with her back to the more vertical trunk. She scooted to one side and patted the bark next to her. “It’s a little cramped for two adults, but I think we’ll fit.”

Seven carefully sat next to her, the narrow confines of the space requiring more body contact than she was accustomed to. But Kathryn showed no discomfort at the way their bodies were touching from shoulder to hip, and even rested a hand on Seven’s leg as she spoke.
“It does my heart good to be here,” she said, looking up into the branches. “And to have the rest of you here. Remember the ion storm just before we went to Dakmor? I remember thinking afterward about the thunderstorms at home, and how ironic it would be if I finally got us home and ran out to see my tree, only to find that it had been destroyed by lightning. It’s standing up here by itself; I have no idea why it hasn’t been hit already. But I’m so glad it hasn’t.”

“As am I,” said Seven. “Since it brings you so much joy.”

Lynne wrapped her hands around the low branch and swung herself up, sitting on the branch with her legs dangling. “Maybe it has the famous Janeway force field,” she said. “The one that repels all damage no matter how many times lightning strikes.”

“I haven’t repelled all the damage,” said Kathryn quietly, and Seven felt an urge to comfort her. An image from Revi gave her the courage to reach out and cover Kathryn’s hand with her own. To her surprise, Kathryn clasped it, holding it for a moment before relaxing her grip. But their hands were still touching, and nothing could have compelled Seven to withdraw.

Revi came up after Lynne and joined her on the branch. “Well, Kathryn, you certainly didn’t come here for the view,” she said. “That is why most people climb trees, you know.”

“I came here for the view today.” Kathryn flashed a smile at her.

“Another perfect photo for the Starfleet recruitment posters,” said Lynne. “Starfleet’s newest hero and her most trusted staff, sitting in a tree like children. Or seriously regressed adults.”

“Personally I’ve found adulthood to be overrated,” said Revi. “Now that we’re home, I may do a little regressing myself.”

“I’ve spent the past four years working toward emotional maturity and now you want to regress?” Seven asked in pretended affront.

“Ooo, Revi, careful,” said Lynne. “Don’t piss off the Borg.”

“Hey, I’m Borg too.”

“Is this a competition?” asked Kathryn. “I had no idea there was such cachet in it.”

“I’ll tell you a secret,” said Lynne in low tones. “At least one of the women in this tree is proud of her Borg uniqueness.”

Revi snorted. “I think several of the women in this tree are proud of their uniqueness. It’s not limited to the Borg types.”
Kathryn caught her eye. “Who are you excluding, Revi? Surely not yourself.”

Seven felt her partner’s embarrassment and smiled broadly, enjoying the gentle teasing. “You cannot exclude yourself,” she said. “You are as unique as any of us.”

“Exalted company, I’d say.” Lynne leaned over and bumped Revi with her shoulder. “I’m really glad you two came with us. It was damn hard to say goodbye to Tuvok after the reception, and B’Elanna and Tom. I know I’ll see them again, but it won’t be the same. And who knows if I’ll ever see Emily again, or Johnson and Slater, or any of the others. We’re all going different ways. So having you here is such a gift. It makes things not so hard.”

“I believe we should be the ones thanking you,” said Seven. “Neither of us has family we’re prepared to meet right now, much less stay with. Your invitation was very welcome.”

“I second that.” Revi bumped Lynne back. “We needed this at least as much as you did.”

“Aren’t we just a perfect little codependent group, then.” Lynne met Seven’s eyes and added, “Old term. It means people who are each emotionally dependent on the other.”

“Like symbiosis,” said Seven.

Lynne held her hand level and wagged it back and forth. “Eh...not really. In symbiosis both parties have an actual need for the service the other species provides. Codependency is usually emotionally unhealthy. More often than not, codependent people enable each other to avoid facing their real issues, so they go on functioning with the same old undressed problems.”

“Ah! Psychocircular matrix,” said Revi.

“Is that the name for it now?”

“Mm hm. A little more exact than your term. And no, we don’t have that problem.” Revi grinned at Kathryn. “In fact I think you and I have the opposite issue. You were so unwilling to enable me that you risked our friendship to open my eyes.”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” said Kathryn. “It wasn’t that I was unwilling to enable you. I just saw you slipping away and couldn’t let it happen. It was more of a selfish thing.”
“Well, there’s a question,” said Lynne. “When we help our friends—or our partners—is it altruistic or selfish?”

“I believe that depends on the situation,” said Seven, who was thinking of Revi’s willingness to let her go with Arrabiss. “Sometimes we make decisions based solely on what we think is best for the friend or partner, not for ourselves. And other times we’re thinking of our own happiness.”

“But if seeing our friend or partner happy makes us happy, then isn’t enabling that happiness selfish?” asked Kathryn.

“The basis of all life is selfishness,” said Revi. “Right down to the cellular level.”

“The Borg elevated that principle to an art form,” said Seven.

Kathryn briefly squeezed her hand. “That’s true on the level of the Collective, but not for individual drones. As a Borg you were prepared to give your life for the Collective. That’s altruism.”

“As a Borg I had no decision-making ability of my own. It’s not altruism if my actions were ordained by the Collective.”

“Besides,” added Revi, “the inherent selfishness of every species is simply a biological mechanism to further the survival of the individual’s genes first, and the species second. Borg drones can’t pass their genes to the next generation, so they act solely to further the survival of the species—the Collective. Which means it’s not altruism.”

“But when Seven came on board, she almost immediately began acting for the survival of her new collective, despite the fact that she had free will. That’s altruism.”

“No, that’s Seven,” said Revi, and Seven felt a warmth in her chest.

“Hear, hear.” Lynne raised her hand in an imaginary toast. “So, my selfish friends, I have a question. Kathryn and I are taking the opportunity to do some skiing while we’re in Colorado this week. And I would very selfishly like you to come along. What do you think? Does it sound like anything you’d enjoy?”

: Would you? :

Seven met Revi’s eyes. : I know you would. That’s all I need. :

: Being altruistic again? : Revi smiled. : The real question is, do you have any desire to go yourself, or is it all on my behalf? :

: Since I’ve never engaged in this activity, I can make no judgment. Which means I will base my choice on what makes you happy. Let’s go. :
Revi held her gaze for a second longer, and Seven shook her head. “We would be pleased to accompany you,” she said out loud, cutting off any further discussion.

“Good!” Lynne rocked on her branch happily. “It’ll be like Girls’ Weekend Out.”

“Don’t worry,” Kathryn told Seven. “I don’t know what that means either.”

Lynne rolled her eyes. “A female bonding tradition from my time. When the women ditched their boyfriends or husbands and went out together to have some real fun.”

“They couldn’t have real fun within their relationships?” asked Seven in confusion.

“Not this kind of fun.” Lynne grinned.

“I think we’re in trouble,” said Revi.

“Always,” answered Kathryn. “You didn’t think that would end just because we made it home, did you?”
Gretchen grumbled to herself as she stared up at her bedroom ceiling. These days it was an even guess as to whether she’d get a full night’s sleep or not. If she could make it past 0400 or so, she would generally sleep through until morning. But if she came awake before then, she was doomed to toss and turn until dawn. She’d long since learned to make use of this time instead of trying to get back to sleep, but still resented the necessity.

Throwing the covers back with a gusty sigh, she quickly pulled on some warm clothes and padded into the hallway. Two doors down she paused, lifting a hand to rest it on the closed door of the guest room. Behind this door was a miracle, and most likely the reason her mind had not allowed her a full night’s sleep tonight. It hadn’t the previous two nights, either. Her daughter was here, in her own home, and she still could not quite trust it. Seven years of fear and grief could not be wiped away so easily. She had never accepted Kathryn’s death, even when so many well-meaning friends had encouraged her to move on, but by the same token she was finding it just as difficult to accept her presence. It was...surreal.

Feeling a bit like a voyeur but unable to stop herself, she carefully turned the knob and opened the door a crack. Moonlight filled the room; Kathryn had never been one to sleep with the blinds closed. A diagonal
slash of silver light brought part of the bed into sharp relief, showing a single large hump under the comforter. Kathryn and Lynne were spooned together, their heads so close they could have shared the same pillow. Lynne was facing Kathryn’s back, her larger body wrapped around her partner, and Gretchen’s vision blurred with tears as she watched them. As a teenager, Kathryn had developed an indefinable reserve that Gretchen had never been able to breach, but here in this bed was the daughter she remembered; the young girl who craved comfort and attention and did not yet understand why she shouldn’t be vulnerable. Somehow Lynne had gotten past all the walls and moved straight into Kathryn’s heart, a feat that neither Justin Tighe nor Mark Johnson had ever achieved. Both had been good men whom Gretchen would have easily welcomed into her family, but she had never believed that either of them could truly reach her daughter. She hadn’t thought anyone could.

Her heart skipped a beat as Lynne suddenly raised her head and looked right at her.

“Gretchen? Is everything all right?” she whispered.

“Yes, fine, I’m sorry. Go back to sleep.” Gretchen backed out and quietly shut the door, feeling foolish and guilty. She hurried downstairs and busied herself making a cup of tea, then closed her eyes when she heard footsteps on the stairs. A moment later Lynne appeared in the kitchen, fully dressed and looking more alert than anyone her age should at this hour.

“Couldn’t sleep either?” Gretchen asked lightly.

“Nope. I was ready to get up anyway.” Lynne stepped next to her and pulled a second teacup from the cupboard. “Do you have enough water for two?”

“No, but I can remedy that.” She ordered up a cup of water from the replicator—one of the few things she regularly used it for—and added it to the kettle. “What’s your pleasure?”

“Hm. What am I in the mood for?” Lynne pulled open the drawer with the teas and began perusing the selection. “You have more teas in here than I’ve seen in a damned long time. This looks like my mom’s drawer.” Her body stilled for a moment before she reached in and pulled out a container. “Moroccan Mint. Holy shit, they still make Moroccan Mint.”

Gretchen looked at her closely before taking the tin from her hand. “Why don’t you have a seat and let me fix this for you?”

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“Actually, I’d rather stay here.” She leaned against the counter and folded her arms across her chest. “There’s something about a kitchen counter. They’re just so inviting. But I’ll take you up on your offer to make my tea; thank you.”

They stood side by side in a comfortable silence as the water heated; a silence that remained unbroken until both were seated at the table with full teacups in front of them. Gretchen stirred her tea longer than necessary before picking up the cup and meeting Lynne’s eyes.

“Are you all right?” asked Lynne gently.

Taking a slow sip, Gretchen replaced her cup and shook her head. “Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“I asked first.”

Her impulse was to dismiss the question, but the early morning hour, the stillness of the house, and the unexpected company in her sleeplessness lent an intimacy to the moment that allowed her to speak more openly than usual.

“In most ways I’m better than I’ve ever been. But in others I just feel...unsettled.”

Lynne nodded without comment and sipped her own tea.

“She’s different,” Gretchen said slowly. “I don’t know her anymore. Sometimes I wonder if I ever did.” She looked up. “Your mother was so fortunate. You two never stopped being best friends.”

Lynne smiled. “We had our moments. I think Mom would have preferred me to take a...safer path in life. And she wasn’t always happy with my other choices, either.”

“You had your moments, yes, but they were just moments. I think my moments with Kathryn turned into a lifetime. And I never figured out how it happened. It just seemed as if, all of a sudden, I couldn’t reach her anymore. She shut me out. She was a forty-year-old teenager.”

“She still is.” Lynne scooted her chair back slightly and extended her long legs in front of her, crossing them at the ankle. “Except that now she’s at the other end of it. She’s shouldered responsibilities that nobody should have to accept, but there’s a part of her that’s still a kid. We tease each other and have tickle fights, and she gets this look on her face that tells me she’s ready to play. I love that look. I love making her laugh, and she laughs so easily.”

“I wish I could see that more often,” said Gretchen wistfully. “I’m so
glad you’ve brought that out in her. She needed you. I think she has for a long time.”

“She needs you, too.”

Gretchen made a noncommittal sound as she brought her teacup back to her lips, and Lynne’s expression sharpened.

“You think I’m just saying that to be nice? I’m not that diplomatic.”

That put a smile on Gretchen’s face. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“I’m not. Ask Kathryn; I think it drives her to drink on occasion. She’s afraid to take me to formal gatherings. You should have seen the look on her face when I told Admiral Necheyev that life was too fucking short to play games.”

The laugh came out of Gretchen before she was even aware of it, shockingly loud in the silence of the house, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. After a few more giggles she took her hand away and said, “You’re right, I should have seen it. She probably wanted to beam you out on the spot.”

Lynne smiled. “Probably. But the Admiral seems to appreciate people who stand up to her, so it worked out. This time. And Kathryn does need you. I know you two haven’t had the easiest relationship, but I also know that she’s trying hard to change that, and she sees you trying too. Neither one of you is doing this alone.”

“I don’t know, Lynne.” Gretchen sighed. “On Voyager we connected in a way we never had before. But these last three days—she’s reserved again. Not nearly so much as she was before, but…she’s certainly not as open as she was on her ship.”

“She’s spent the last three days in her childhood home. Everyone turns into a kid again when they go home. It’s Human nature. You connected on her turf, Gretchen. But she’s on your turf now.”

“Do you think that’s it?”

Lynne hesitated. “I think that’s part of it. And part of it is that you and she haven’t really had any alone time.”

“Well, it’s true that Seven and Revi—”

“I’m not talking about Seven and Revi.”

Gretchen looked at her in confusion. “But I can’t think she’d act any differently around you. You’re the one who—” She stopped, eyes widening. “You mean Phoebe?” At Lynne’s confirming nod, she put an elbow on the table and rested her forehead against her hand. “Oh. Oh, shit. I
never…” Looking up, she said, “But I thought Kathryn would want her whole family around her.”

“She does. Just not at the expense of time alone with you.” Lynne pulled her legs in and sat up straight. “May I be tactless for a moment?”

“Please.”

“Phoebe is an attention-getter. I’ve read between the lines of what Kathryn’s told me about her family, and it’s pretty obvious that while Kathryn was all about self-control and discipline and forming herself in an image she thought her father would want, Phoebe has been all about following her own path regardless of outside influence. That’s not to say anything against her; in fact I’d have to characterize myself that way, too. But she’s the sort of person who draws attention to herself wherever she goes. And Kathryn fades into the background.”

“Are you kidding me? Captain Kathryn Janeway in the background? She’s one of the most famous people in the entire Federation right now.”

“I’m not talking about the Federation, I’m talking about your kitchen. Where family dynamics keep playing out no matter what’s happened out there. Phoebe’s here every minute of the day until we go to bed and she goes back to her own house.” Lynne leaned forward. “She’s had you all to herself for seven years. Give Kathryn a little of that special time.”

Gretchen didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “I’ve wanted that special time too. But I didn’t want to take away from her time with everyone else. She’s had so little opportunity to relax; I thought it was doing her good to just be comfortable and surrounded by people who love her.”

“It is.” Lynne reached across the table and took her hand. “Don’t kick yourself. It’s doing Kathryn a world of good being here, and eating your home-cooked meals—and oh god, your brownies—and having the time to wind down. Don’t fault yourself for what you’ve offered her. Just do what you wanted in the first place. Spend some time alone with her. She wants it too.” She squeezed Gretchen’s hand and sat back to sip her tea. In the silence Gretchen heard Molly shaking her head in the living room, her soft ears making a distinctive flopping sound until she settled down again.

Lifting her cup, she took a thoughtful sip and said, “What an irony. All this time I’ve been trying not to be selfish in my need for time with my daughter, and now you’re telling me that’s exactly the opposite of what I should be doing.”
Lynne raised an eyebrow. “Seems to me you’re the type who always tries not to be selfish. Get over that one, Gretchen. The rest of us have.”

They stared at each other for a moment before bursting into laughter, and this time Gretchen didn’t try to keep herself quiet. “I can see why Kathryn laughs more often,” she said, still chuckling.

“Well, it works both ways.”

“I know. She’s told me.” She used her napkin to wipe up a drop of tea that had fallen from her spoon, then smiled at her companion. “You really gave me a turn when I was peeking in your room, you know. I hadn’t expected you to be awake.”

“I’m usually awake around this time.” Lynne tapped her head. “Borg implants don’t need sleep the way Human brains do. Four hours and I’m good to go.”

“‘Good to go’ being a relative term,” said Gretchen. “How long can you last without recharging in your alcove?”

“Revi says I shouldn’t go more than three days, four at the outside. We do have a portable regeneration unit, but it’s not a permanent replacement for the alcoves. So yes, I’m still tied to the ship right now. All three of us are.”

Gretchen nodded; Kathryn had already told her that tomorrow would have to be their last day for a while. They had to return to Voyager that night so that Lynne, Seven and Revi could recharge, and the next day they’d be in Colorado.

“I’ll miss you when you go back. It’s been wonderful having you here. And if I’d realized that your sleeping patterns coincided with mine, I’d have issued a standing invitation for tea in the kitchen. Normally I sit down here alone with a book. It’s nice to have your company.”

“It’s nice to have yours. On Voyager somebody was always awake no matter what time it was. It’s been a little different here.”

“What have you been doing? I was down here last night and didn’t see you.”

“The first night I came down to the living room and read a book. Last night I went for a walk.”

Gretchen almost missed her saucer as she set her cup down. “Outside? In the dark? Lynne, you don’t even know the area. What if you’d been caught in a snowstorm? Even people familiar with this place have gotten
in trouble when they weren’t careful. An Indiana winter is nothing to mess around with.”

“Well, now I know where Kathryn gets her protective streak.” Lynne’s smile crinkled her eyes. “I do know the area. I saw it from the hovercraft when we arrived.”

“And that’s all you need?” asked Gretchen incredulously.

“Borg implant, remember?”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means I have an enhanced capacity for a lot of things, and one of them is making mental maps based on what I see. Since I got an aerial view of the area when we came here, it made for an easy map.”

“You know,” said Gretchen, “that’s a pretty handy little device you have there.”

“Sometimes. I certainly wouldn’t have chosen to get one, but I have to admit it really does have its benefits.”

“What else does it do? If you don’t mind my asking?”

“No, I don’t mind. It’s kind of like a giant computer database: full of answers, but I have to ask the question. It’s not like all that knowledge is at the forefront of my mind all the time. Actually, I experienced that when my implant first came on line, and let me tell you, it’s a killer. But as soon as I need to know an answer, it’s right there. I also have an enormously enhanced memory, though mine still isn’t eidetic like Seven’s. And I have the personal knowledge of others, which took a while to get used to.”

“You mean you have…other people’s memories?”

Lynne nodded. “In a way. The Collective strips all emotions from them; they consider that to be useless data. But they keep some of the context intact, because in many cases a memory contains more powerful knowledge when it’s in context. When I call up some bit of information, I never know if it’s going to be simple data or an actual memory.”

Gretchen tried to imagine it and failed. “I can certainly see where that would have taken some getting used to.”

“Mm hm. And think how much harder it is for Revi. As a doctor, a lot of her knowledge comes in the form of memories. And she knows precisely how those memories were acquired.”

“My god.” She knew the basics, of course. Kathryn had given her a quick rundown of all three of her new guests, but she’d never thought
beyond the general concept. “Poor Revi. It must feel like everything she
does as a doctor comes with a Pyrrhic cost.”

“That’s a pretty accurate description. And yet she has so much more
potential for good because of it. She can do things no other doctor can. I
know without a doubt that she’s the only person who could have saved
me after my assimilation, and I’m pretty sure no one else could have
saved me after Terellia. Starfleet is going to be falling all over itself to keep
her in the ranks, and I suspect other organizations will be lining up their
recruitment packages as well. She told me yesterday that the Vulcan
Medical Academy has already made an offer. And it’s a tempting one,
because Vulcan is one place she could go without fear of being judged.
Seven would fit in very well on Vulcan, too.”

“That would hurt Kathryn,” said Gretchen, almost to herself. “She’s
not ready.”

“I know.”

Gretchen met her eyes. “Neither are you.”

Lynne inclined her head without speaking.

“Which reminds me,” said Gretchen, “you never answered me. How
are you doing?”

“I’m fine.” Lynne suddenly discovered that her tea had cooled and took
several sips. “I’ve been thoroughly enjoying being back on Earth, and
eating myself into a coma. Now I understand why Kathryn always raved
about your brownies.”

“Does that sort of overt redirection work on Kathryn?”

A sheepish smile crossed her face. “Only when she’s distracted.”

“I’m not distracted.”

“So I noticed.” Lynne looked down into her tea, and for a moment
Gretchen thought she wasn’t going to answer. “I really don’t know,” she
said slowly. “How do I measure it? I don’t know what I’m supposed to be
feeling. There are all sorts of guides for getting through the death of a
loved one, but so far I haven’t found any guides for getting past your
own death.”

“Good point.” She watched Lynne stir tea that didn’t need stirring.

Dropping the spoon on the saucer with a clink, Lynne said, “I think
I’m still in limbo. I mean, you’d guess that I’d be feeling profound relief,
or profound happiness, or profound something. But I don’t. God knows I’m
glad to be alive, don’t get me wrong. But I’d given up, Gretchen. I
accepted my death because I had to. I was furious at having to leave Kathryn, hating the men who had done that to us, grieving for what I could see in Kathryn’s face...but for all that, I had to accept the fact that I was going to die. And once you’ve wrapped your brain around that, it’s kind of hard to unwrap it.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m alive. But the strongest emotion I have about it is for Kathryn’s sake, not mine.”

“Hmm.” Gretchen propped her chin on her fist. “Well, you haven’t been alive very long. Maybe it’ll sink in.”

“Maybe. But in the meantime I’m finding it pretty difficult to care much about the things I’m supposed to be worrying about. The Foundation doesn’t seem all that important anymore. I can’t drum up any interest in it.”

“Do you have to take it over?”

“I’ve been asking myself that very thing. I had myself all convinced that I owed it to my parents, but now...” She shook her head. “I’m not so sure. They would have wanted me to be happy, and they know that sitting in an office is not what makes me happy.”

“Then don’t.”

“I have to. I have to deal with it at least long enough to redirect the funding back into space exploration research.”

“But then you can walk away, right? Put it in the hands of capable managers and let them do their jobs. Seems to me that Alison Necheyev is already taking care of most of it for you.”

“Alison.” Lynne ran a hand through her hair. “Now there’s a woman who intimidates the shit out of me.”

Gretchen couldn’t stop the snort, nor the chuckle as Lynne turned a look of confusion on her. “Good heavens, don’t you have the slightest concept of how intimidating you are?”

Lynne rolled her eyes. “I’m not. Not like that. The woman single-handedly runs one of the largest foundations in the quadrant. She’s also a physics theoretician, is apparently on a first-name basis with everyone who’s anyone and oh yes, let’s not forget, she knows her way around legal contracts. I couldn’t get past the first two pages of that mess she sent me. It’s written in a foreign language. Not even the Collective knows Federation legalese; I guess they didn’t assimilate any lawyers.”

“Uh huh. You don’t think Dr. Necheyev might be intimidated by
acquiring an employer who survived two years in the Delta Quadrant, Borg assimilation, and outright death?”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Well, you’ve got that much right, at least.”

“You know,” said Lynne, “right now I’m seeing a lot of Kathryn in you.”

Gretchen raised her cup. “I’ll take that as a fine compliment.”
Kathryn took a leisurely shower, finding herself reluctant to finish up and get downstairs. She’d woken up alone again, and was feeling a bit peevish about it. It didn’t do any good to remind herself that it had been her choice to go to sleep with Lynne rather than wake up with her. With Lynne only needing four hours of sleep, it had to be one or the other, and Lynne had asked her preference. Still, couldn’t she just once be there in the morning too? Just to surprise her wife, who was feeling out of sorts and...

“Needy,” she muttered to herself as she rinsed her hair. “God, I’m needy today. Snap out of it, Katie.”

As pep talks went, it wasn’t a particularly inspired one, but it did the trick. She finished her shower and was dried and dressed a few minutes later. The scents wafting up from the kitchen were just as mouthwatering as they had been every morning since their arrival; this time she was certain it was French toast. She sniffed appreciatively as she descended the stairs.

“I smell cinnamon and vanilla,” she announced in the kitchen doorway. “At this rate you’ll never get me to leave.”

“Ahh, you’ve figured out my scheme.” Gretchen poured a mug of coffee and handed it over.

“It seems to work on Phoebe as well,” said Revi. She and Phoebe were
sitting at the table, already finishing up their breakfasts. “She never even
got out of walking distance.”

“Hey.” Phoebe pointed a fork at Revi. “Not all of us think flying all
over hell and gone with nothing but replicator food is a desirable career
path. I’ll have you know that I’m envied throughout the art world for my
lifestyle choices.”

“What lifestyle choices?” Kathryn pulled out a chair and sat on the
other side of the table. “That would imply you actually made some.”

“Funny, big sister. And you think you’re all that different? You don’t
make choices, you just go wherever Starfleet tells you.”

Revi looked from one to the other with widened eyes. “Whoa. Who
blew the whistle this morning?”

“I don’t know,” said Gretchen from the stove, “but it had better stop
now. Ladies, if you can’t be nice I’m chucking both of you outside. The
path to the guest house needs shoveling again; it snowed last night. You
can work out your frustrations on that.”

Kathryn looked into her coffee mug, then up at her sister. “Sorry,” she
said shortly. “I’m a little on edge this morning.”

Phoebe stared. “Oh my god. Did you just apologize to me? Wait, wait—
could you repeat that? I’m not sure I actually got it all the first time; I was
too much in shock.”

That was all it took to push Kathryn beyond her social abilities for the
day. She stood up, coffee mug in hand. “News flash, Phoebe. I’ve been
gone for seven years. Maybe I’m not the same person you remember. And
you know what? All I ever did for those seven years was make choices.
Goddamned hard choices, every goddamned day, and I can never take any
of them back.” She had a glimpse of wide eyes and an open mouth before
turning to meet her mother’s startled gaze. “If you’d like to hold off on
my breakfast for a while, Mom, I’ll take care of that path for you. Is the
shovel still where it always was?”

“Yes...”

“All right.” Kathryn went to the cupboard, pulled out her Academy
travel cup and poured her coffee into it, ignoring the utter silence in the
kitchen. “Where are Lynne and Seven?”

“Out for a walk,” said Revi. “They’re at the creek now. Apparently the
fractal patterns in the ice are particularly fascinating.”

Kathryn was amused in spite of herself; she knew which of the two
was finding those patterns fascinating. Sealing the cup, she glanced at Revi. “Will you ask Seven to tell Lynne that I’m up?”

“She already knows.”

“Thanks.” She was out of the kitchen before anyone could say anything else. Throwing on her coat, she sat on the hallway bench and began strapping on her boots, hearing low voices in the kitchen. Phoebe’s rose above the rest as she protested, “But I didn’t mean it that way…” With a vicious yank, Kathryn tightened the last strap and was out the door.

The temperature had dropped considerably overnight, and the shock of the cold air gave her pause. She stood for a moment on the porch, gazing at the pristine landscape, newly blanketed in white—except for two sets of boot prints leading into the fields. A smile crossed her face as she saw the neat lines of prints suddenly degenerate into prints facing all directions, along with scatter marks indicating where snowballs had landed. She’d hate to be between those two in a snowball fight.

The silence and cold had already helped to clear her head, and she was feeling considerably more settled as she found the shovel, headed around the corner of the house, and began digging. After ten minutes she had to take off her coat and drape it over a shrub; ten minutes after that she knew she’d be taking a second shower. She’d forgotten just how arduous shoveling snow could be.

A familiar sshushsh of the door alerted her to impending company, and she hoped it wasn’t Phoebe. She listened to the footsteps crunching in the snow, but did not pause in her efforts until her mother’s voice said, “That’s hungry work. Care for a piece of toast?”

Kathryn chunked the shovel into the snow and turned, ready to defend herself against what was sure to come. But her mother’s face bore no expression of censure, and she was holding out a napkin with two pieces of French toast rolled into cylinders and fixed with small picks.

“That’s delicious. Care for a piece of toast?”

Kathryn took the napkin and bit into one of the warm toasts, startled by the flavors that exploded into her mouth. “Oh, yum. Banana syrup?”

“You always did prefer it over maple.”

“You always did prefer it over maple.”

“You always did prefer it over maple.”

“Still do.” She wolfed down both toasts without so much as a nod toward manners; after all, if she’d taken any longer they would have gotten cold. “And the replicators never did get it right. Neelix tried it
once; after that I was pretty much turned off it forever.” She folded the napkin, wiped her mouth and tucked it into her jacket pocket.

“Why on earth did you keep him in the mess hall?”

“Because nobody else wanted to do it, and he loved it, and after a while he actually did come up with some decent meals.”

Gretchen shook her head. “Maybe Starfleet should send him out for remedial training before inflicting him on any other crews.”

“Good idea. I’ll suggest it.”

They watched each other in silence, and Kathryn tensed again.

“Listen, Mom—”

“Would you like to take a walk with me?” Gretchen interrupted.

Kathryn was caught with her mouth open. “Ah…all right. Yes.”

She put her coat back on, following her mother out to the road. Once there she moved up beside her as they walked westward, neither saying a word until they’d passed the first knoll and the Janeway house dropped out of sight.

“I’m going to miss you when you leave,” said Gretchen.

“We’re not really leaving. We’ll just be in Colorado for a few days, and then I’ve got the publicity tour and the final debriefings. Those won’t keep me in San Francisco overnight. We can be back here most nights for dinner as long as you’d like to have us.”

“I know. But it won’t be the same as having you here all day. And maybe that’s best for you.”

Kathryn gave her mother a sidelong glance. “What does that mean?”

“Just that you always seem happiest when you have something to do. I was hoping these last few days would help you relax, but now I’m not sure that was really what you needed.”

“It was, Mom. God, you have no idea how much I needed it. Just the chance to sleep in, three days in a row, and wake up every morning to the smells coming out of that kitchen—it’s been priceless. I dreamed about that in the Delta Quadrant.”

“Thank you for telling me that. It means a great deal.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sorry I didn’t say it earlier.”

For a few moments there was no sound but the crunching of their boots in the snow. Once again it was Gretchen who broke the silence.

“I’ve been thinking about that lately...how I’ve spent so much of my
life guessing or making assumptions about the needs of my family. I was never certain what your father needed, either.”

After a startled pause, Kathryn said carefully, “You didn’t talk about it?”

“In the beginning we didn’t have to. We both wanted the same things. It seemed as if we were always on the same wavelength. But then Starfleet took him away for longer and longer periods of time, and when he was home it felt…well, it felt a bit like he was just docked here for a few days before taking off again. We weren’t on the same wavelength anymore. But we’d never really developed the communication skills to work around that. I did my best to guess what he needed and provide it for him, and he always seemed to appreciate it, but in a distant sort of way.”

“I felt that distance too,” said Kathryn. “I guess it never occurred to me that I wasn’t the only one.”

“You were young. You weren’t supposed to be thinking about anyone but yourself at that age. I was. And I’m ashamed to say that I never realized your father’s preoccupation was having such an effect on you. He told me about your discussion in the study, when you finally said that you just wanted him to be proud of you. His heart was broken, Kathryn. He loved you so very much, and he realized that night that he’d been failing you. We both had. There could not have been two parents in the quadrant more proud of their daughter than we were of you, and somehow we’d failed to show it to you, and you’d managed to grow up and get a commission and still not know. He and I had a long talk after that, and got a lot of our own issues out into the open. I don’t know if it would have ever happened if you hadn’t had the courage to speak first. And then…he died. And everything went to hell. But I always had one thing to hold close to my heart, and that is that he did not die without knowing precisely how I felt about him. Nor did I have to wonder how he felt about me. And you were the reason why.”

Kathryn stared straight ahead, unable to think of anything to say and feeling distinctly uncomfortable at the turn the conversation had taken.

“In these last few days I’ve watched you, and I see so much of him in you,” Gretchen continued. “But you’ve taken a lot of his best characteristics and avoided some of the worst. Your relationship with Lynne is very different from mine with Edward. And I’m very glad to see it.”
Frowning, Kathryn kicked an ice clod away. “I never knew you were unhappy in your marriage.”

Gretchen reached for her arm and pulled her to a stop. “No. That’s not what I said, and don’t ever think it. I loved your father very much. But he and I...we made too many assumptions over the years, and we got out of the habit of checking in with each other to see if those assumptions were true. I don’t see that happening with you and Lynne.”

Kathryn managed a smile. “Lynne would never let it happen.”

With a knowing smile of her own, Gretchen said, “I had a chat with her last night, in the kitchen. That woman does not like talking about herself when it comes to anything negative. I had to drag a few things out. So don’t sell yourself short. That’s not happening in your marriage because you’re not letting it happen.”

Something eased inside Kathryn’s chest, and she resumed their walk with a lighter step. “Actually it’s both of us,” she said. “Lynne’s very good at dragging things out of me, too. But in the beginning her reticence was one of the biggest stumbling blocks to our relationship. We worked on it, and we even wrote a promise of openness and honesty into our marriage vows. The worst times we’ve had in our marriage were the times we didn’t keep that vow.”

“I wish Edward and I had had the foresight to do that. We just assumed that love was all we needed. You and Lynne have been so much smarter. I’m in awe, Kathryn. Truly. And I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you.” Kathryn was a little in awe herself; she couldn’t remember ever having a conversation like this with her mother.

“So if you don’t mind, I’d like to take a page from your book.” Kathryn looked over in surprise, but Gretchen’s gaze was fixed on the horizon as she continued, “I’ve made too many assumptions in my life. And it’s such a habit that I do it without even noticing. It took Lynne to point out that I was doing it yet again, with you. But I’m hoping that I’m not too old to learn from my mistakes. I don’t want to be guessing about you, and getting it wrong, and losing any part of this connection we’ve made. It’s taken us too long to get here. Do you think...” She trailed off.

When the pause grew awkward, Kathryn prompted, “Do I think what?”

Gretchen met her eyes. “Do you think you could treat me with the
same honesty you give Lynne? So that I can stop guessing? I want to be here for you, Kathryn. But you’re going to have to help me learn how.”

Unsettled by the naked vulnerability in her expression, Kathryn broke their gaze and focused on the snowy road ahead. This simply did not fit with her understanding of her mother. For that matter, it didn’t fit with her understanding of their relationship; neither of them had ever been in the habit of dropping her guard. Since the moment she’d arrived on Voyager, Gretchen had been acting out of character, and Kathryn found herself wary of the changes.

Then again, wasn’t Gretchen having the same problem? Trying to fit her daughter into an old understanding that didn’t work anymore?

If it ever did, she thought, and suddenly understood what her mother was telling her.

“I can’t guarantee that I can break a lifetime of habit all at once,” she said. “But I’m willing to try.” She turned her head and saw the dawning smile on Gretchen’s face. “On one condition,” she added, and the smile dropped.

“What’s that?”

“You do the same for me.”

The smile returned in blinding force. “Deal,” said Gretchen, and held out her hand as they walked. Kathryn took it, squeezing it and feeling her own hand gripped in response.

“So tell me, are you getting what you need right now?” she asked, letting go reluctantly and putting her hand back in her warm pocket.

“My daughter is home. That’s all I’ve ever needed.”

“Mom…” She shook her head. “Don’t flunk on your very first try. If you were getting everything you needed we wouldn’t be out here walking through shin-deep snow for no particular reason.”

“Getting some time alone with you doesn’t count as a real reason?”

“Is that why you asked me to come with you?”

“Is that so surprising?” Gretchen scuffed her boot through a small lump of snow. “Yes, that’s why I asked. I’d been assuming…again…that you needed your family around you. Lynne pointed out last night that maybe you needed a little less quantity and a little more quality in terms of family time. The ironic part was that I wanted some time alone with you, but it seemed like a selfish thought. Lynne told me I should get over worrying about being selfish.”
Kathryn laughed. “Wish I’d heard that conversation.”
“No, you don’t. Your ears would have burned too much.”
“You spent the night talking about me?”
“Among other things. And other people.”
“Ah.” Kathryn knew precisely what that meant, and though her mother said nothing, she felt the need to acknowledge it. “I’m sorry. Seven years away and it only took three days for Phoebe to get under my skin. I can beat the Borg and even species 8472, but apparently I can’t beat old mental programming. She just…gets to me.”
“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You went from seven years in charge, with the respect of everyone on your crew, to…here, with your little sister showing you the same disrespect she always has. I’m sure there had to be some sort of mental disconnect happening.”
“God. That is it, isn’t it? The disrespect. Before it was just Phoebe being her usual annoying self. And now it’s Phoebe being her usual annoying self when I—” She stopped, unable to finish the thought out loud.
“When you deserve better?” guessed Gretchen. “Let me tell you something. You’ve always deserved respect. You’ve worked hard for it and you’ve earned it. And you do have it from Phoebe; she’s damned proud of you. But she’s having a hard time right now, too. She’s the younger sister of the famous Captain Janeway. She can’t go anywhere without people wanting to know about you, what you’re really like, how it was to grow up with you…and on and on. She hasn’t said as much, but I think Phoebe feels as if she’s vanishing into your shadow.”
“And the best way to get rid of a shadow is to cut down the tree that creates it,” said Kathryn in dawning understanding.
“Well, I wouldn’t put it quite that way. But…there may be some truth in it.”
“I don’t know if I can do anything about that, Mom. I don’t have any control over the way Starfleet is handling this. If I did, there certainly wouldn’t be any damned publicity tour. God, they’re actually planning parades.”
“Want a suggestion from your mother?”
“That depends on the suggestion.”
Gretchen laughed. “You have been on your own too long. You’ve
become instinctively careful. All I was going to suggest was that you visit your sister’s gallery. Let her show you what she’s proud of.”

They walked in silence, their breath pluming in the crisp air. Kathryn looked around at the familiar landscape, mentally marking the boundaries between properties she’d known all her life. The landscape was a welcome constant in her homecoming, when everything else seemed just a little different.

“You know, it’s funny,” she said. “The most traumatic part of coming home has been the changes. But so far as I can see, Phoebe hasn’t changed at all. Maybe I should be grateful for that.”

“Oh, she’s changed. She’s a little older, a little better at knowing what she wants, and a tiny bit better at picking her lovers. But not much.”

Kathryn snorted, a great puff of white vapor giving visual emphasis to her rather impolite response.

“But as far as loving you, no, that part hasn’t changed. Unfortunately neither has her way of showing it. And it probably never will.”

Gretchen’s eyes were still on the road ahead, but Kathryn felt an arm go around her waist. Just as a matter of balance, she had to put an arm around her mother’s shoulders, and the smile that came unbidden to her face could not be wiped away.
“Welcome back, Captain Janeway.” The young ensign stood so stiffly at attention that Kathryn thought she heard his spine crack.

“Thank you, Ensign.” She nodded at him and walked into the corridor, muttering, “Feels like I’ve never been gone.”

“It does feel a bit odd,” Revi said from behind her.

“Because we beamed in,” said Lynne. “It’s too familiar. If we’d walked up the ramp we’d have more of a sense of change. Sorry, folks, that’s my fault.”

“That is incorrect. You can’t be blamed for security measures made necessary by an outside threat.”

“Seven’s right.” Kathryn caught her wife’s hand as they walked. “Stop thinking in those terms.”

“Well, it’s kind of hard when we’re skulking around like fugitives,” said Lynne.

They were back aboard Voyager, after bidding goodbye to Gretchen and Phoebe at the Bloomington transport station. With prior Starfleet clearance, they’d beamed directly aboard the ship via a relay link. Walking through these familiar corridors, it was difficult to believe they’d spent the last four days in Indiana. But the stiff-necked ensign in the transporter room was not a member of her crew, and Kathryn knew she was unlikely
to run into any familiar faces tonight. By now almost all of her crew had packed up their belongings and departed for their homes, whether here on Earth or elsewhere in the quadrant. Though the officers and all of the Maquis crew had been required to remain within recall distance of Starfleet Headquarters, everyone else had been given free transport to the destination of their choice. Kathryn had checked in with Starfleet’s database from Indiana, and knew precisely who had gone where. It felt too sudden, too anticlimactic; but then again what did she expect? That her crew would hang around San Francisco for a few weeks, waxing nostalgic about their adventures before wandering off? She herself had made a beeline for her mother’s house the moment the reception had ended.

“Speak for yourself; I’m not skulking,” said Revi as they arrived in front of the turbolift. “I’m just taking the swiftest and most convenient route from Bloomington to here.”

“Thanks, Revi.” The ‘lift doors opened, and Lynne led them in. “But you know, I’d have enjoyed something a little more leisurely and scenic. For god’s sake, we’re back on Earth and I haven’t seen anything except Starfleet Headquarters and Kathryn’s farm.”

“You saw the Bloomington transport station,” Seven pointed out.

Lynne shot her a poisonous look. “Deck eight.”

“Belay that,” said Kathryn. “Deck two.” Three pairs of eyes turned to her in surprise, and she gave them a smile. “Unless you have somewhere else you need to be, I thought we’d go to the mess hall and have a drink while we look at the view.”

It worked; Lynne’s eyes brightened. “I’m in.”

Revi’s grin said that she knew exactly what Kathryn was doing. “Me too.”

“Now that the idea has come up, I find myself craving a Hamilton gin and tonic,” said Seven.

“Okay, I forgive you for the transport station comment,” said Lynne magnanimously. “A gin and tonic sounds perfect.”

The mess hall was dark and abandoned, but as soon as they set the lights to half intensity and sat down with their drinks, the room took on a feeling of cozy familiarity. The wall of viewports offered a spectacular view of the San Francisco skyline, the bay, and the sparkling lights of the opposite shore.
“You know,” said Lynne, “it does my heart a lot of good to see that bridge. I look at that and it feels like I’m still in my old time.”

“It’s not the same bridge, though,” said Kathryn.

“I know. It was rebuilt after the earthquake of 2168.”

“Your Borg information is out of date. This isn’t that bridge, either. Remember the Breen attack? Dominion War?”

“Oh, right. Jesus, I forgot. They flattened Starfleet Headquarters and destroyed the bridge. You know, that’s a hard one to wrap my mind around. Earth under attack by aliens.”

“First successful alien attack in two hundred years,” said Revi. “The last was during the Earth-Romulan War. And it could have been so much worse; the Breen warships were all stopped before they reached Earth. All the damage was done by smaller fighters. If a single warship had gotten through, there wouldn’t even be a San Francisco anymore, just a crater.”

There was a short silence as they contemplated the prospect.

“Do you know that there are thirty-year-old captains commanding ships all over Starfleet now?” asked Kathryn. “We lost so many officers in the Dominion War that they were handing out promotions like candy. When I made captain at thirty, it was an accomplishment. Now it’s…normal.”

“‘Normal’ is subjective,” said Seven. “‘Normal’ becomes whatever it is defined to be at the moment.”

“Well, at no moment in Starfleet history was it ever normal for thirty to be the average age of a captain.”

“Do you feel guilty, Kathryn?” Revi looked at her in complete seriousness. “For not being here? I mean, I know it’s ridiculous and it’s not as if any of us would have chosen to be where we ended up, but...when I read about the Dominion War, I felt guilty. A lot of people I worked with died. And I wasn’t there.”

“I lost a lot of colleagues, too.” Kathryn sipped her whiskey and soda thoughtfully. “And yes, I did feel guilty when the news first reached us. But that was two and a half years and one lifetime ago. We fought our own wars with no help and no support; I won’t feel guilty for not fighting this one.”

“So far as I know, my parents were here during the attack,” said Revi. “They weren’t on the casualty lists—I checked—but I don’t know if they
lost the bar. It’s still in the San Francisco directory, so if it was destroyed, they rebuilt it. It’s amazing to look at this view now and realize that a lot of what we’re seeing is less than three years old.”

“Are you going to see them, Revi?” asked Lynne.

“Eventually. Seven and I have agreed to prop each other up through our respective family encounters. I’m not sure which of us is looking forward to it the least.”

“You are,” said Seven. “At least I know that my Aunt Irene wants to see me.”

“Good point.” Revi took a deep draught of her drink.

“Wait a minute,” said Lynne. “How do you know your parents don’t want to see you if you haven’t called them?”

“Because I know my parents.” Revi’s voice was flat.

“Maybe you don’t. It’s been eleven years; people change.”

“That’s precisely the point. I’ve changed, into the one thing my father hated most. Come on, Lynne, I hid my marriage to Steph because of his hatred for telepaths. Prejudice like that doesn’t just go away. And once he finds out that not only am I engaged to another telepath, but I’ve been modified into one myself—” She waved her hand. “The best thing I can probably expect is that he’ll slam the door in my face. And my mother will be standing behind him, looking at me sadly but not lifting a damned finger to stop him.”

“Surely he would draw a distinction between a Betazoid and a modified Human,” said Kathryn. “My understanding of that kind of prejudice is that people hate telepaths because they fear them, and the fear is personal. But you can’t read anyone’s mind but Seven’s.”

“And mine, if she wants,” interjected Lynne.

“If you want,” said Revi. “You know I’d never activate that link without your permission.”

“I know.” They smiled at each other in recognition of how hard fought that trust had been. It wasn’t too long ago that Lynne had been terrified at the prospect of anyone inside her mind.

“Okay, you can read two minds instead of one,” said Kathryn. “My point remains the same: you are not a personal threat to your father, and neither is Seven. Surely, once he understands that, he’ll accept you. For god’s sake, it’s not like you volunteered to be assimilated.”
“That’s what I love about you, Kathryn. You’re so optimistic.”

“Revi did not choose to be Borg,” said Seven. “But she has chosen to keep her internal transceiver active, as have I. As has Lynne, for that matter. It’s likely that when her father learns that she could be normal—” she paused, a tiny smile crossing her lips in acknowledgment of the word — “but prefers not to be, he will be repulsed.”

“More so than if I’d been born with the ability,” added Revi. “Choosing not to get rid of it will make it worse in his eyes.”

“But aren’t you overlooking the possibility that he might just be glad you’re alive?” asked Kathryn.

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Lynne. “Yes, he’s been a prejudiced bastard in the past, but he thought you were dead, Revi. Having a daughter rise up out of the grave is a pretty powerful inducement to change. Maybe he’ll consider it a miracle of the gods.”

“Maybe. The truth is, that thought is the only thing that could induce me to knock on his door. Otherwise I wouldn’t bother. I almost didn’t anyway.” She raised her glass toward Kathryn. “You’re the reason I’m taking the chance.”

“I am?”

“Well, not you individually. You and your family. Seeing the three of you interacting made me hope. If there’s even a possibility that I can recover some tiny piece of what you have, I’d like to try.”

Kathryn reached across the table and laid a hand on her arm. “You already have a piece of that. You’re part of my family too, Revi. You and Seven both. I’d never say this in hearing range of my mother, but I’m closer to you two than I am to my own sister.”

“I know.” Revi covered her hand and held it there, a soft smile on her face. “But I guess I’m greedy. I’d like more if I can get it.”

“Hear hear.” Lynne raised her own glass. “To family.”

“To family,” they echoed before drinking.

“Is this our new toast?” asked Seven. “We used to say ‘to the journey.’ What do we say now that the journey is over?”

Lynne shook her head. “Don’t be so literal. In my experience, if you’re living right, the journey is never over.”

“That’s the truth,” agreed Kathryn. “Maybe we should toast to the ongoing journey.”
“That sounds a bit awkward,” said Revi. “How about ‘to a journey without end’?”

“No, that sounds like we’re hoping for immortality. I already have that.” Lynne shot a half-smile toward Kathryn, who really wasn’t certain how to respond.

“How about our original toast?” she said. “The one we used in Voyager’s early years: to the adventure.”

They looked at each other. “To the adventure,” they said, and four glasses clinked together.

Kathryn settled into her bed, feeling an overwhelming sense of displacement. Since she and Lynne hadn’t packed up their quarters, there was no sign in her surroundings of the reality of their location. Even Lynne’s absence felt normal; it was just her night to regenerate. Unless she looked out her viewports, she could easily convince herself that Voyager was simply orbiting a planet, or at station-keeping somewhere, still in the Delta Quadrant.

But then there was the view. No star streaks, no planet, no darkness of space. Instead, the lights of San Francisco shone on her, a jarring proof of Voyager’s grounding, and she could not understand why she felt so alone. What was wrong with her? She’d done everything she wanted. She’d brought her crew home; she’d brought her ship back not only unharmed but technologically enhanced; she’d brought enough data to keep Federation scientists busy for decades. She’d even saved the lives of three very special people. Yet here she was, at the scene of her greatest triumph, and everything felt wrong.

“You’re just feeling needy,” she muttered out loud. “If Lynne were here you’d be fine.”

For some strange reason, that knowledge made her feel even worse.

“It’s like a ghost ship,” said Lynne as they entered the alcove unit. “I can’t get used to everyone being gone.”
“Welcome to my world,” said Seven, using one of Lynne’s own phrases and earning a startled look.

“God, I didn’t think about that. You’ve been through this before, when Kathryn severed you from the Collective.”

“Yes, but my experience wasn’t precisely the same thing.”

“It was worse, actually,” said Revi. “You didn’t just lose the comfortable familiarity of your external environment; you lost everything familiar about your mind as well.”

“So did you,” Seven pointed out. “In reverse.”

“You know,” said Lynne, “I think this is part of the reason Kathryn feels closer to you two than to Phoebe. She shares blood and a childhood with Phoebe, but she shares experiences with you that no one else can possibly understand. There are things we know that simply can’t be explained to anyone who hasn’t been a part of the journey.”

“There are things this entire crew knows that can’t be explained,” said Revi. “The psychological reality is, we were at war. Everyone who was with Kathryn from the beginning was at war for seven years. Except it wasn’t a normal war; it was a war on the run, with constantly shifting enemies and no clearly trustworthy allies. That’s not something anyone can understand who wasn’t there. And that’s precisely why Kathryn wanted counseling available for her crew.”

“How many will take advantage of it?” wondered Seven.

“Not enough,” said Revi. “But it’s good to know that those who want it will have it available.”

“So when is your first appointment?” asked Lynne.

Revi shared a glance with Seven. “Next week. We’re seeing Deanna Troi.”

“Good for you,” Lynne tilted her head. “What you just said, about war—it reminded me of something I haven’t thought about in years.” She hesitated. “Can I share it with you?”

“Absolutely,” said Revi with a smile.

Seven reached out for Revi’s hand, enjoying the warmth of her emotion. Lynne’s requests for the activation of her frequency were impossible to predict, and they’d both stopped trying to discover a logical pattern behind them. But they cherished every occurrence, and Seven never gave up hoping that someday Lynne would feel comfortable enough to simply keep her frequency open permanently.
Her friend came online with an ease born of practice, and immediately both Seven and Revi were taken to a vivid memory. It was nighttime, and they were at the center of several tents barely visible in the darkness. A small gas stove was heating a pan of water, and a man sat before it, occasionally holding his hand over the rising steam to warm it. Another stove glowed a short distance away, and the voice of a different man could be heard, telling stories of heroism and daring.

*What a moron,* Lynne said in her memory.

The man looked up, a smile showing two silver capped teeth. *You're just now figuring that out?*

No, I figured that out when the bastard assumed I’d bring him his coffee because I have a pair of breasts.

Nice ones, too.

*Shut up, Digger.* But Lynne’s memory was one of affection, and Seven knew this man was a friend. *I’m talking about his war stories.* He’s an asshole; there’s no way he did any of those things he said he did. I don’t believe a word of it.

The man looked at the pan of water, saw the bubbles rising, and busied himself tearing open a foil packet and pouring its contents into the pan. As he stirred, he said, *I’ll tell you a secret. There’s a sure fire way of telling those who went to ‘Nam from those who didn’t. The guys who were there don’t talk about it.*

*You were there,* said Lynne in sudden realization. Digger nodded.

Yeah. And there isn’t a damn thing I can say about it that will make any sense. So I don’t say anything at all. Guys like him? He jerked his thumb toward the voice from the other stove. *They make shit up to make themselves look big. But anyone who was there, we know the truth. And the truth isn’t something we talk about.*

*You were there,* said Lynne in sudden realization. Digger nodded.

Yeah. And there isn’t a damn thing I can say about it that will make any sense. So I don’t say anything at all. Guys like him? He jerked his thumb toward the voice from the other stove. *They make shit up to make themselves look big. But anyone who was there, we know the truth. And the truth isn’t something we talk about.*

*Why not?*

He looked up. *Because the only ones who can understand are the ones who were there. And they mostly just wanted to not be there. So there’s not much to say.*

*But don’t you think you have an obligation? I mean, the only way we can ever move beyond war is to learn from our mistakes, and how can we learn if the people who really saw those mistakes, and suffered because of them, don’t talk about it?*

*I have no fucking obligation,* Lynne. Not to you, not to some kid writing her high school report on Vietnam, not to my mom, not to anybody. I fulfilled my obligations long before they shipped me home.
That’s not what I meant. God, I can’t even imagine what you saw over there. I’m not saying you have to bare your soul. I’m just saying—
That’s just it, he interrupted.
What is?
Vietnam ripped all of us down to our souls. You say I don’t have to bare my soul; it’s already bare. It will be for the rest of my life. That’s why none of us talk about it. I don’t think I understand.
He stirred the pot and said, Good. I pray that you never do.
The memory ended, and Lynne’s thoughts echoed through their link. : I thought he was brushing me off. But really, he was giving me a blessing. :
: He was. : Revi nodded. : Probably the best one he could give. :
: Yeah. But it didn’t work. I understand now. We all do. Almost four hundred years later and the psychological experience is just the same. :
: Why would it be different? : Seven wanted to know. Revi and Lynne looked at each other, then back at her.
“Good question,” said Lynne.
And since there was no answer to it, the women quietly made their way to their alcoves. A minute later there was no sound in the cargo bay save the hum of flowing energy.

Kathryn came wide awake at the sound, her body reacting long before her sleep-fogged brain could even comprehend what the alarm was for. As she jerked on her pants and shoved her feet into her boots, her mind finally caught up.

“Janeway to security!” she shouted. Damn it to hell, why had she let Tuvok go home? “Intruder alert in Cargo Bay Two!” She was yanking her jacket on over her bare torso and moving toward the door before an unfamiliar female voice responded, “Acknowledged. We’re on our way.”

“So am I. And you’d better beat me there.” Phaser in hand, she ran out the door.

Seven was jolted out of her regeneration by a silent alarm directly to her cortical implant. When Kathryn had ordered the construction of the
alcove unit, Seven had requested and received permission to install an alarm system as well. With Revi sharing the unit, Seven’s concern for unauthorized entry had suddenly and dramatically increased. She wanted to make certain no one would be staring at the woman she felt such a strong need to protect. And when Lynne had joined them in the unit, Kathryn had asked Seven to route the alarm notification to her ready room and personal quarters as well.

In the twelve months since the alarm was originally installed, it had never been tripped. Now it flashed through all three of their alcoves, ending their regeneration simultaneously but without an audio confirmation. None of them moved.

: Can you see anyone, Seven? :

From her position closest to the door, Seven had the best view of any of them.

: The door is still shut. No one has gained entry yet. :

: Then let’s go. :

Revi and Seven detached themselves, with Lynne following as soon as she saw them. “Link me up, Revi,” she whispered. In an instant she was online, not even bothering with direct thought but merely sending an image of where she wanted them to be. It was a more immediate form of mental communication, and Revi and Seven took up position on one side of the door, while Lynne crouched on the other. Whichever of them had the earliest and safest chance of taking down the intruder would act immediately.

They could hear the muffled chirps of a manual bypass. Whoever was on the other side of the door was good; Seven had programmed that lock with a Borg algorithm. It was certainly giving the intruder problems, but the fact that he or she had even gotten this far was sobering.

A final chirp, a click, and all three of them tensed as the door slid open. For a moment nothing happened; then a figure in black stepped through. Through the link they shared, Seven knew Lynne had already seen the energy weapon in the figure’s right hand, held low against the body. She was on it instantly, her prosthetic hand crushing the fingers around the weapon with an audible crunch. With a gasp the figure twisted, and Seven saw the glint of metal in its other hand. She and Revi both jumped at the same time, and Seven wrenched the knife away while Revi slammed her Borg arm against the intruder’s skull. The figure went
face down in a heap, with Seven and Lynne following it down to make sure it stayed there. As they held it by the arms and shoulders, Revi called out “Computer, lights!”

“It’s a Cardassian,” said Lynne in surprise.

The woman glared at her from the corner of her eye, blood trickling down her ridged forehead. “You’re a dead woman,” she growled.

“Not tonight,” said Lynne, adjusting her grip and immobilizing their prisoner in a shoulder lock. “Seven, get some wrist restraints.”

Seven called out her order as she hurried toward the replicator, and the restraints were waiting for her by the time she arrived. In a moment she returned and locked the Cardassian’s wrists. As soon as the prisoner was secure, Lynne hooked her hands under the woman’s arms and hauled her to her feet. “Who the fuck are you?” she asked.

Revi moved toward them, intent on examining the woman’s wound, and was caught by surprise when the Cardassian suddenly kicked outward. She twisted away, but not quickly enough, and her shock at the pain sliced through the link. “Shit! Look out for the boots, she just cut me!”

“What the hell is going on here?” Kathryn was there, holding a phaser on their prisoner, and right behind her were five Starfleet personnel in security uniforms.

“Energize,” gasped the woman.

“You fucking bitch,” growled Lynne, raising her fist. Seven beat her to it, her anger burning out any coherent thought. This woman had hurt Revi; she was going to crush her skull. But the Cardassian dematerialized, and Seven’s fist went right through the shimmering outline. Lynne barely ducked in time.

: Seven! :

The fear in Revi’s call cut effortlessly through Seven’s rage, and she whirled in time to see her partner drop bonelessly to the deck.

: Neurotoxin… I need to get to sickbay, now! :

She barely registered the look of horror on Kathryn’s face as she scooped Revi’s limp body into her arms and shouted, “Computer, emergency medical transport!”

As the beam took her, she heard Kathryn’s voice saying, “Trace that woman’s transport and put guards outside sickbay! Computer, site—”

She materialized in sickbay and was already laying Revi on a biobed as
Kathryn and Lynne beamed in. “What happened?” Kathryn demanded as they strode toward the bed, but Seven wasn’t listening.

: Revi, tell us what you need! :

Revi’s eyes were wide open and staring at the ceiling. : Cyclochloromine... : Her thoughts were chaotic as she struggled to stay focused, but the instinctive fear of a dying body was overpowering her. : Seven, I can’t breathe! :

: I’ll get it. : Lynne ran for a supply cabinet on the opposite wall. : Seven, just hold her. Revi, you’re going to be all right, okay? Just hang on. :

Seven tried to fight her own terror, but it was impossible when she could feel Revi dying. She held Revi’s hand and leaned over the bed, putting her face in her lover’s line of sight. “You will not die,” she said, the fear making her voice harsh. “Do you hear me? You will not.”

: Don’t let me go. :

: I won’t. :

: Stupid...shouldn’t have been so close... :

Seven squeezed her hand. “I should have broken both of her legs,” she said venomously. “I’m the stupid one.”


But Revi was fading out of consciousness, and her last thoughts were too chaotic. The link shivered and broke, leaving Seven desperately alone in her mind.

“Fuck!” swore Lynne as she appeared at Seven’s side. “Computer, list known neurotoxins used by Cardassians and cross reference with cyclochloromine. How many of those neurotoxins are neutralized by cyclochloromine?”

“One,” said the computer. “Axilese is a—”

“Great,” Lynne interrupted. “What’s the required dose of cyclochloromine to neutralize axilese in an adult human female, approximately...” She looked at Seven.

“Eighty-six kilograms. But I don’t know how much of that is Borg implants!” Seven was despairing at their lack of necessary data. Revi was dying and they didn’t even know how much of the antitoxin to give her!

“Approximately seventy kilograms,” said Lynne quickly, and Seven looked at her in fear. That was nothing more than a guess. What if—
“Recommended dose is between ten and fourteen cubic centimeters, depending on the patient’s age, gender, and health status.”

Lynne had punched in a setting and was pressing the hypospray to Revi’s neck before the computer finished. A second later she was running a medical tricorder over Revi’s torso, shaking her head as she read the results. “The antidote is working, but her heart and lungs have already stopped,” she said grimly. “She’s going to need a jumpstart.”

“A what?” asked Kathryn as Lynne pulled open a supply drawer. Seven was beyond asking; she seemed to exist in a suspended state of agonized terror.

“Cortical stimulation,” said Lynne, fastening the stimulator to Revi’s forehead. “Seven, let go of her hand.”

In a daze, Seven let go and stepped back. “Activating stimulator,” she heard Lynne say, and Revi’s body convulsed. Lynne returned with the tricorder, staring at the readout and growling, “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Seven’s mind cleared enough for one ascendant thought. A neurotoxin this powerful would destroy Revi’s neural pathways. Borg nanoprobes or not, if she died they would never bring her back.

Lynne made an adjustment to the panel controlling the stimulator. “Activating,” she said, and Seven’s biological eye misted over as Revi’s body convulsed a second time. The silence in her mind, the artificially induced movement in Revi’s body—it was surreal, worse than a nightmare. Revi was gone. The body on that biobed was just a shell.

Lynne had the tricorder out again, and the moment she held the probe over Revi she let out a cry. “Got a heart! Come on, Revi, come on, breathe. Breathe or I’m going to have to do it for you…”

Seven held her own breath, waiting. The room was utterly silent as the tension rose to intolerable levels.

“Goddammit!” Lynne threw the tricorder onto the bed and tilted Revi’s head back. Just as she pulled the respirator from the supply drawer, Revi’s chest heaved in an explosive gasp as her diaphragm was released from its paralysis.

Seven dropped her head in abject gratitude, hearing a quiet “Thank god” from Kathryn.

Lynne closed the drawer and leaned weakly against the bed. “ Fucking hell,” she whispered to herself, before straightening and picking up the
tricorder once again. She passed it over Revi’s body, then closed it and looked at Seven. “She’s going to be all right. Jesus Christ, that was close.”

Seven picked up Revi’s hand and cradled it. “Too close,” she said, her voice shaking. Revi’s eyes were shut now; she looked as if she were merely asleep. Seven couldn’t even begin to process the wild swings of emotion she’d just careened through. She suddenly felt tired, as if she’d been working without regeneration for five days straight.

“Can you tell me what happened?” asked Kathryn.

Lynne put the tricorder down, braced her hands on the bed and let her head hang. “Give me a second.”

Kathryn put a hand over hers in silent support, and Lynne shifted enough to tangle their fingers together. For a moment Seven felt wildly envious as she held Revi’s limp hand in her own.

“I’m not even sure,” said Lynne at last, raising her head. “The alarm brought all of us out of our regeneration cycle, Revi linked us together, and we ambushed that woman the moment she came through the alcove door. Revi hit her so hard she shouldn’t even have been conscious, but we didn’t know she was Cardassian.”

“If I’d known, I would have crushed her trachea,” said Seven. How she wished she’d done it! Anything to save Revi from this.

Lynne straightened and gave her a sympathetic nod. “Anyway, we incapacitated her, but Revi went to look at her injury and the bitch kicked her. She had a blade built in to her boot; it must have been spring-loaded. She couldn’t get me because I was behind her, so I guess she went for the next best thing. Did you see Revi go down? It was like she’d been shot.” She moved down to Revi’s leg and carefully pulled the sliced edges of the uniform pants apart, revealing an already-closing cut. “It’s just a shallow cut,” she marveled. “That stuff is unbelievably nasty.”

Seven felt the link reactivate, though Revi’s eyes were still shut. : Revi? :

: I’m here. Barely. :

The familiar voice in her mind weakened her knees, and she gripped the bed with her free hand for support.

“She’s awake,” Lynne told Kathryn.

“She doesn’t look like it,” said Kathryn doubtfully.

“That’s our Kathryn,” mumbled Revi. “Doesn’t believe it if she can’t see it.”
Seven realized belatedly that she was nearly crushing Revi’s hand. Hurriedly she loosened her grip and brought the hand to her lips for a tender kiss, whispering, “Revi…”

“I’m all right.” Revi’s eyelids fluttered open. “Gods, I have a headache that would make a Klingon cry.”

“Can I give you triptacederin without causing any damage?” asked Lynne. “You’ve got some powerful chemicals running around your body; I’m afraid to give you anything else.”

“Triptacederin is fine. Twenty cc’s.”

“Twenty? That’s a lot, are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

As Lynne loaded the hypospray, Revi looked at Seven. “Thanks for getting me here.”

“I would have walked through bulkheads to get you here,” said Seven truthfully. She still felt dazed.

“I’m just grateful we were on Voyager,” Lynne said. “If we’d been anywhere else, we wouldn’t have had access to the cyclochoromine.” She injected Revi, then removed the cortical stimulator and put the tools on a nearby tray.

“Ohh, much better.” Revi sighed in relief. “Thank you. Now I know why the Federation put axilese on the banned substance list. I knew it was a fast-acting neurotoxin, but gods above, that drug could take out an Arkonian dreadbeast in half a second.”

“It took you out in about thirty seconds,” said Lynne. “If you hadn’t kept your wits about you long enough to tell us what you needed, we’d never have figured it out in time.”

“How did you know it was axilese?” asked Kathryn.

Revi rubbed her forehead where the stimulator had been attached. “She was a Cardassian assassin, so I assumed she’d been trained by the Obsidian Order. That narrowed it down. They use a number of toxins for various results, and axilese is their favorite for instant death. When I felt everything shutting down so quickly, I knew.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we happened to have our CMO with us.” Kathryn put a gentle hand on Revi’s shoulder. “Please don’t scare us like that again.”

“Not high on my list,” said Revi. “Where did she come from?”
“I’ve been wondering the same thing.” Kathryn raised her voice slightly. “Janeway to security.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Who’s in charge of the security detail for this ship?”

There was a tiny pause before the same voice answered, “I am, Captain. Lieutenant Terrill.”

“Then Lieutenant Terrill, I’d like to see you in sickbay. Now.”

The doors slid open immediately, and a short, powerfully built Bajoran woman stepped into the room. “Yes, ma’am,” she said, coming to stiff attention.

“Lieutenant, can you explain to me how the hell a Cardassian assassin got on board my ship without setting off any intruder alerts?”

Seven could detect the Lieutenant’s discomfort from all the way across the room, but the woman maintained her respectful attitude as she answered, “She disabled the sensors and came in through an external access hatch on deck one. She must have beamed onto the top surface of the ship to avoid being seen by the guards at the ramp, and used the hatch to avoid risking detection of an unauthorized transport into the ship itself.”

“Great,” growled Kathryn. “So a single Cardassian just pulled down the pants of an entire Starfleet security unit and a ship’s defenses.”

“With respect, ma’am, the ship’s defenses are not fully active,” said Terrill carefully. “We’re grounded, so we have no shields.”

Kathryn went still. “Well, shit,” she said so softly that Seven barely heard her. In a normal tone she said, “Did you at least track her?”

“No ma’am. Her transport signal was scrambled. It could have come from anywhere in near orbit. Starfleet has already issued a no-fly order for all ships in orbit, but…”

“But what?”

Terrill looked even more uncomfortable, if that were possible. “The Dominion War changed things, ma’am. No planetary government can hold a no-fly order for longer than six standard Stardate units. We’ll do all we can, but our best chance of apprehending the assassin was on this ship.”

The pause that followed this statement was loaded with Kathryn’s anger, though she never moved a muscle. “I see,” she said, and even that simple sentence had the security officer looking fearful. “Then set up a
program to monitor the commbadges of every person on this ship. Nobody comes aboard without one, not me, not Admiral Paris, no one. Any individual detected without a commbadge is to be immediately neutralized, do you understand? And keep a constant cross reference between commbadges and associated life signs and vital signs; I don't want anyone sneaking in with a stolen badge.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll begin right away.”

“Good. Lieutenant, am I correct in assuming that a security breach like this will not happen again?”

“It will not, ma’am.”

“See that it doesn’t. I really don’t care to be a sitting duck on my own damned ship. Dismissed.” As the doors closed behind the Lieutenant, she let out a breath and looked at the rest of them. “I miss Tuvok.”

“And I miss the Doctor,” said Lynne. “Christ almighty, I do not want to do that again.”

“What you do. Stand between life and death. My god, I have no idea how you do that day after day. My hands haven’t stopped shaking.” She held them up. “Even my prosthetic is shaking, and I don’t know how that’s possible.”

For the first time since the link had reactivated, Seven took a moment to listen to her friend’s thoughts. She was startled to hear the echoes of terror, having not realized that Lynne had been almost as frightened as she was.

“Adrenaline,” said Revi. “Your prosthetic is just resonating with the vibrations of your arm. My heart stopped, didn’t it?” She looked around as everyone nodded. Meeting Lynne’s eyes again, she said, “Then you did precisely what your medic training taught you. Good work.”

“Thank you,” added Seven, knowing the words were woefully inadequate. “If you hadn’t been here she would have died.”

Lynne’s mouth twisted. “If I hadn’t been here she wouldn’t have been in the slightest danger.”

Revi reached out with a still-weak hand, grabbed Lynne’s collar and pulled her forward until their faces were centimeters apart. “Shut up, Hamilton,” she said. “You’re my friend and I don’t have so many of those that I can afford to let assassins pick any off. Got that?”
“Got it,” whispered Lynne, and Revi let her go. Lynne dropped a quick kiss on her cheek before straightening.

“I can’t afford to let assassins pick any of us off,” said Kathryn firmly. “But our problem just got a lot bigger. How did that woman know we were on board?”

They all stared at her.

“Someone in Starfleet leaked the information,” Seven realized.

“Yes. And Admiral Necheyev is the one who cleared us for the relay transport. I trust her, but she’s got someone under her command selling us out.”

“The order for our relay transport can’t have gone through too many people,” said Revi. “That will narrow the list.”

Kathryn shook her head. “There shouldn’t be any damned list at all. How could our own people do this?”

“We don’t know that they did,” said Lynne. “We beamed out of a public transport station. It’s not like Starfleet beamed us directly from Gretchen’s house. Though clearly they should have,” she added darkly.

“Starfleet doesn’t do direct transports without cause,” said Kathryn. “They didn’t have any reason. Up until now, everything’s been conjecture.”

Revi let out a hoarse, croaking laugh that startled all of them. “That didn’t feel like conjecture to me.”

“Then how do we get to Denver?” asked Lynne. “Do we trust Starfleet or use public transport?”

“If the assassin was hired by one of Lynne’s fund managers, they know precisely when we’ll arrive at the Hamilton Foundation,” said Seven. “The manner of transport won’t matter.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go,” said Kathryn. “This is getting too dangerous. There are other ways to deal with the Foundation.”

“No fucking way,” said Lynne. “I’m not running. I won’t give them anything they want. But I don’t think you should come with me.”

“No fucking way,” said Revi immediately. “You’re not going anywhere without us.”

“We are a collective,” said Seven.

“Just what I wanted, my very own collective,” Lynne muttered, but her emotions belied her words.

“On second thought, we should go,” said Kathryn. “I just realized
something. Whichever of Lynne’s fund managers is behind this will want the hit to take place in a way that won’t be traceable back to him—or her. That’s why Voyager was the perfect place, and it’s also why Denver is probably the last place they’ll try something. In fact, the Foundation building may be the safest place on Earth for you right now.”

“Lovely,” said Lynne, in a tone that indicated exactly the opposite. “I can’t wait to see it.”
Gohat watched the controls carefully, making absolutely sure the transport could not be traced. His attention was so focused that he was the last of their group to notice Lira’s furious expression when she materialized.

“I take it your mission failed,” said Dukali, standing by the transporter pad with his arms crossed over his massive chest.

“My mission would have been swiftly accomplished if someone had done their job properly. Had I known in advance that they had a Borg-encrypted alarm on their door, I could have circumvented it.” She glared at Dukali. “But since someone failed to gather all of the necessary details for this mission, those three Borg women heard me tinkering with the damned alarm and were waiting for me.”

“Looks like you got the worst of it,” observed Dukali, unaffected by her venom. He reached out a finger and smeared some of the blood on her cheek. His voice was noticeably colder as he added, “So you failed and you wish to blame me for it. And yet you were the one who demanded this assignment; you were the one convinced that the kill should be yours and no other’s. Therefore the failure is yours alone as well. I gathered every bit of data available through our network; the lack of information regarding their Borg alarm is not my fault. It is no one’s fault. The mark of a well-trained operative is not how she performs on a
perfect mission, but how she performs on one where the unexpected occurs.”

Gohat would not have stood in Dukali’s boots for anything; Lira’s withering glare threatened to castrate the man where he stood. And yet he was angry as well. She had cost them their best asset in this assignment. They would never again have an opportunity like this one; their target was now on her guard.

But as he watched, her expression turned to a vicious pleasure. “When the unexpected occurred, I demoralized them by killing the doctor. Since the element of surprise has been lost, I introduced the element of fear.”

“Not our first choice,” said Dukali, glaring at her. The room crackled with tension until he added, “But a worthy second one.” He pulled Lira to him and kissed her roughly, then looked at her in surprise. “Why…oh.” He began to laugh. “Did you kill the doctor before or after they restrained you?”

Gohat looked then, and saw the wrist restraints binding her arms behind her. Meeting Nivel’s eyes, he saw his partner smother a grin even as he swallowed his own. It would never do for Lira to see either of them showing amusement at her embarrassment. They were a tightly-knit cell and had been through much together, but they all knew where the lines were drawn. Lira’s was drawn right in front of her oversized pride, and she was not above avenging herself if she thought that pride injured. And her pride would be especially tender now, after such a spectacular defeat at the hands of her victim.

“After,” she said, her eyes narrowed. “And you can laugh when you yourself have accomplished a kill despite being bound and held. If I’d had a blade in my heel as well as my toe, our target would be dead even now. Another oversight for which I am not responsible.” She pinned Gohat with a stare. “Now would you mind getting these off me?” Pointedly, she turned around and waited.

“Standard Starfleet restraints,” he said, recognizing the model instantly. “This should take about fifteen seconds.” Pulling a small tool from his belt, he stepped up to her and delicately finessed the mechanism in the restraints. In just a few moments the restraints gave up with a small click and fell to the floor.

“Sixteen seconds,” said Nivel. “You’re slowing down.”

“I’m out of practice. It’s been a while.” Gohat replaced his pick as Lira
turned around, rubbing her wrists. He noted that she wasn’t using the fingers of her right hand.

“It will be a long time before it happens again,” said Lira. “And in the meantime, I will make a modification to our boots, to correct that oversight.”

“They’ll be expecting that,” said Dukali.

“Maybe, maybe not. I won’t underestimate this target. But I won’t overestimate it, either.” Without sparing a further glance to any of them, she strode from the room.

“I knew it was a mistake to send her alone,” said Nivel. “You should have gone with her.”

“I hope that’s not a statement on her capabilities.” Dukali may have been angry with his lover, but he was also the first to defend her.

“Certainly not. But I believe we all underestimated this target. We thought the risk of two of us in the ship was too high. But the risk of failure is higher.”

“I agree,” said Gohat. “The longer we take to accomplish this job, the more difficult it will be. And it’s already difficult enough to send one of the best operatives in the Obsidian Order back to her ship in defeat.”

“Not only in defeat, but in restraints,” added Nivel. “And with broken fingers which she does not want us to notice.”

Dukali looked from one to the other, then nodded. “Agreed. From now on we work together. Failure is death.”

“Failure is death,” they repeated in unison.
Alison caught herself smoothing her hair for the second time and firmly put her hand into the pocket of her suit jacket. It was a nervous gesture left over from her teen years, and most likely made her look about that age now.

She stood alone in the lobby of the Foundation building, waiting for her guest. In a rather juvenile demonstration of power, the board officers had chosen to wait in the conference room, leaving her to escort Lynne Hamilton to their domain. She wondered if a single one of them had thought that just maybe, the way they treated Ms. Hamilton today might affect the way she treated them tomorrow.

The lobby was open to the ceiling fifteen floors above, where the light pouring in through the transparent aluminum panels made the interior nearly as bright as the outside. Potted plants grew all around the periphery, and a small waterfall burbled over a rock formation near the entrance. It was an imposing but attractive space, and normally Alison enjoyed the greenery and the soothing sound of falling water. Today she was barely aware of any of it, her attention fixed on the group walking up the steps toward the main doors.

She’d expected Captain Janeway to accompany Ms. Hamilton, of course, but not Commander Sandovhar and Seven of Nine. Nor had she expected the Captain to be out of uniform. It was a little odd, seeing her
in a dark business suit, but in retrospect it made perfect sense that Janeway would remove any visible sign of Starfleet from these proceedings. Ms. Hamilton and the others were similarly dressed; if Alison hadn’t known who they were, she might have mistaken them for executives who worked in the area. Downtown Denver was full of people who looked like that.

*Then again, maybe not,* she thought as the sunlight glinted off metallic implants. A moment later the doors slid open, and she stepped forward.

“Good morning,” she said, extending her hand to Ms. Hamilton first. God, this woman was tall. “Welcome to the Hamilton Foundation headquarters.”

“Thank you, Dr. Necheyev.” Hamilton’s handshake was just as firm as it had been at the reception. “It’s good to see a familiar face. You’ve met Commander Sandovhar and Seven of Nine?”

Alison traded handshakes all around as she said, “Yes, I had the pleasure at the reception. I hope we’ll have the opportunity to speak more after the meeting. Depending on the outcome, of which I’m not in the slightest doubt, I thought you all might enjoy a tour of the building.”

“Yes, I think we would,” said Hamilton, looking around the lobby. “This is a hell of a design. Beautiful, but…” She craned her neck to see to the roof. “Clearly meant to make a statement.”

“You’re not supposed to notice that part,” said Alison with a smile. “You’re just supposed to be subliminally intimidated by it.” But Hamilton looked back at her without the faintest trace of an answering smile on her face, and Alison immediately got down to business. “I can order some refreshments for your guests if you’d like. The lobby is very comfortable; no one will disturb them while they wait. The meeting shouldn’t take more than half an hour.”

“My guests are not waiting in the lobby,” said Hamilton. “They’re accompanying me.”

Alison was caught flat-footed. “Ah…Ms. Hamilton—”

“I’m sure we’re not expected,” said Captain Janeway smoothly. “And we do apologize for the unexpected change to your plans. But given recent events, we feel it best not to leave Lynne alone.”

“Recent events?”

“Such as attempted murder,” said Commander Sandovhar.

“What?” Alison nearly dropped her teeth. “Mother of God! Was anyone
hurt?"

“Not permanently,” Sandovhar said dryly. Seven of Nine gave her a sharp look.

“I suppose cardiac and respiratory arrest are only temporary medical issues,” she said. Meeting Alison’s eyes, she added, “Revi was injured by a blade carrying a dose of neurotoxin. She nearly died.”

“I see your aunt hasn’t mentioned it to you,” said Janeway. Alison looked between them in horror. “No! When did this happen?”

“Last night. After we had secretly beamed aboard Voyager. Or at least we thought it was in secret.”

“Shit,” said Alison before she could stop herself. “Commander Sandovhar, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Somehow it seemed as if it was. “Did you get him?”

“It was a her,” said Janeway. “A Cardassian, probably from the old Obsidian Order. And no, she got away. She was very well prepared for her mission.”

Alison felt a chill. The Obsidian Order had been one of the most secretive intelligence agencies in both the Alpha and Beta quadrants, known for its absolute ruthlessness. It was wiped out after the Battle of the Omarian Nebula, leaving Cardassia in a power vacuum. When Cardassia joined forces with the Dominion two years later, the Intelligence Bureau rose from the Order’s ashes, but with an entirely different political force at its head. Consequently, a significant number of Order members were excluded from the ranks of the new Bureau and turned into political exiles. Alison had heard that some of them had reorganized into a mercenary force of spies and assassins for hire.

“If she was from the Obsidian Order,” she said slowly, “then she may not be the only assassin on the contract. They work in cells.”

“Yes, we’re aware of that,” said Janeway. “We had an extensive conversation with Admiral Necheyev last night; she filled us in on the more recent history.”

Alison turned to Ms. Hamilton. “We have to get you formally installed and your testament filed. The sooner the better.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Hamilton. “I’m getting tired of my friends paying the price for being my friends.”

“I thought we’d talked about this,” said Sandovhar.
“Clearly she has already forgotten.” Seven of Nine raised her eyebrow, an act that drew considerable attention to her optical implant.

“I haven’t forgotten. I’m just ready to end this.” Hamilton made an impatient gesture. “Shall we go?”

“By all means. If you’ll follow me, please.”

Hamilton nodded and fell into step beside her. Alison tried to appear calm, but her head was buzzing with the implications. It had happened. All this time she’d been able to rationalize that maybe the slipstream drive mousetrap hadn’t actually been intentional; maybe she and Aunt Alyynna had simply been overcautious. There had been no proof, not even a scrap of evidence regarding the guilty intentions of any of her board officers. But it had happened. Someone had actually attempted to kill Lynne Hamilton. There could no longer be any doubt that either Brian, Charles or Elise were willing to murder to preserve their power and income.

And all three of them were in the conference room right now, waiting. Alison felt a sudden chill, her neck tingling in the aftermath.

They made the trip to the fifteenth floor conference room in utter silence, broken only by Alison’s murmured “this way” as they exited the lift and walked down the corridor. Normally she appreciated the open feel of the corridors, with their floor-to-ceiling windows looking onto the lobby, but now she just felt exposed and vulnerable.

One of my employers is a killer. How am I supposed to act now? How can they all be so damned calm? Is this what Starfleet training does, make you so immune to fear of death that it doesn’t shake you when it comes so close? She glanced over at Hamilton, who was pacing beside her with a completely shuttered face. God, I forgot. She already died. What is there to fear when you’ve already done it once?

For some reason, that thought made her even more uncomfortable.

She stopped in front of the heavy wooden doors, touched the entry pad and led the way in. Brian, Charles and Elise were clustered at the head of the large conference table, watching the door as they entered. Her eyes darted from one face to the next, looking for any expression that might give the killer away, but so far as she could see they all just looked curious. Well, in Brian’s case, curious and irritated.

“Dr. Necheyev,” he said, rising from his chair. “We were not expecting additional guests.”

“These are my friends,” said Hamilton, before Alison could respond.
“And they’ll be acting as my advisors for this meeting. Has everyone already met?”

Alison watched Brian’s bushy gray eyebrows contract, and wondered if Hamilton had actually planned that. Her question implied that the presence of the others was a foregone conclusion, and there was no way Brian could contradict the assumption without coming off badly.

“Yes, I believe we have,” he said, and came around the table with Elise and Charles behind him. Introductions were unnecessary, since they had indeed all met at the reception, but protocol had to be observed as handshakes were traded all around. Charles’ pleasure at seeing Captain Janeway again would have amused Alison at any other time, but now she wondered, as she watched him flash his winning smile, if he was the one trying to kill her wife.

The initial pleasantries over, Brian led the board officers back to their seats. Alison had already noticed a fourth water glass set out for her, right next to Elise, and the fifth sitting alone at the opposite end of the table. It was a cheap power play, made all the more glaringly ridiculous by the fact that there were now four people to seat rather than one. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Hamilton register the glass and shoot a glance at Janeway, who gave a slight shake of her head. As if they’d planned it, the women split up, with Hamilton and Janeway seating themselves next to Alison, while Sandovhar and Seven of Nine took the seats across the table. The glass was left behind.

“Ms. Hamilton, I see no need for preambles or explanations,” said Brian. “I know Dr. Necheyev has explained our position to you, and your very presence here is a de facto claim on the legacy of the Hamilton trust.”

“That’s correct, and I agree,” said Hamilton.

“Good. Then let’s get down to business. If you are truly Lynne Hamilton, then you are in possession of knowledge that will enable you to answer a few questions that the founders provided as a litmus test. I have those questions here. If you—”

“Hold on,” interrupted Hamilton. “The founders, as you call them, are named John and Elizabeth Hamilton, and I’d like them to be recognized as people rather than some oblique historical figures. They’re my parents, and to my point of view I left them just two years ago. They’re still very much alive in my mind.”

Brian frowned. “Of course. Though you must realize that to our point
of view, they lived a very long time ago.”

Hamilton inclined her head, but said nothing. Brian waited a beat, then continued, “If you answer the questions correctly, we will then conduct a DNA analysis, comparing your sample with one that the...that John and Elizabeth Hamilton preserved.”

“Why not just do the DNA analysis now?” asked Hamilton. “You seem to be a man who values his time; we could cut right through all of this.”

“The DNA analysis is additional evidence, not conclusive evidence. Preservation methods of the early twenty-first century were not up to today’s standards. We also have no way of knowing how the Hamiltons preserved the sample prior to establishing the Foundation and gaining access to the more expensive and reliable scientific methods.”

Hamilton looked across the table at Sandovhar, who said, “That’s true. There’s no question that a properly preserved DNA sample would be viable after three hundred and seventy-five years, but the key point is the manner in which it was maintained.”

“I’d give my parents credit for finding out what they needed to do,” said Hamilton. “But do go on. The questions should be interesting.”

“Very well.” Brian activated a PADD, cleared his throat, and said, “What is your middle name?”

“Delilah.”

“Where did it come from?”

“It was my grandmother’s name. My maternal grandmother,” she added, seeing Brian’s small frown. He nodded once.

“Who was your best friend?”

Hamilton smiled for the first time. “Janet Ruiz.”

“What was the name of your favorite teddy bear?”

The smile grew larger. “Snuffy.”

“Snuffy?” whispered Janeway.

“What was the first thing you ever climbed with a rope?”

Hamilton leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest, the smile on her face breaking into an open grin. “My parents’ house. I threw a grappling hook over the roof and pretended I was Edmund Hillary on Everest.”

“And what was the result of this climb?”

“A trip to the emergency room for a broken elbow.” Alison heard a tiny
snort from across the table, and Hamilton pinned her gaze on Commander Sandovhar. “Something funny?”

“Oh, no.” Sandovhar waved her hand. “Just good to know that you’ve been consistent your whole life. How did your parents survive your childhood?”

“With just as much grace as you’re surviving my adulthood.”

“If I may continue?” asked Brian, in a tone that said he was not asking at all.

“Please,” said Hamilton with a relaxed wave of her hand.

“Who won the 1989 World Series?”

To Alison’s surprise, Hamilton burst out laughing. “Oh, god,” she said, still chuckling, “a perfect question. Good job, Dad, I know that one was yours.”

“Could you answer the question, please.”

“I have no idea. Dad knew I hated baseball and he knew I wouldn’t be able to answer the question. Does he have anything in there about women’s beach volleyball?”

“In fact the next question is, when was women’s beach volleyball first played in the Olympics, which nation took home the gold medal, and who was your favorite member of its team?”

“Nineteen ninety-six, Brazil, and I thought Sandra Pires was hot.”

Alison thought she saw Brian’s expression relax just a little.

“In nineteen ninety-five, you attempted to break a climbing record on the Nose route of El Capitan. What did your mother give you for the climb, and what did she tell you to do with it?”

“She gave me a card and told me I wasn’t supposed to open it until I got to the top.”

“And what did the card say?”

Hamilton’s smile slipped. “It said…” She paused and took a deep breath. “It said that whether or not I broke the record didn’t matter, because she was proud of me regardless. She said that achieving goals was not necessarily the important thing; it’s the pursuit that matters. That was Mom’s life philosophy.”
Brian stared at the PADD, his silence elevating the tension in the room. Finally he raised his head and said, “Over three hundred and sixty years ago, Elizabeth Hamilton wrote a message to the person who could answer those questions correctly. Ms. Hamilton, this message is for you. She wrote, ‘I’m still proud of you.’”

Alison glanced at Hamilton and as quickly looked away again, giving the woman what privacy she could. It was Captain Janeway who said quietly, “It sounds as if you’re convinced of Lynne’s identity.”

“Yes, I am,” said Brian. “Of course we’ll still need the DNA analysis, but to my mind that is merely satisfying the requirements set out by Ms. Hamilton’s parents. Ms. Hamilton,” he added in a friendlier tone than Alison had ever heard from him, “with your permission I’ll call in our doctor and take that sample.”

“Sure.” Hamilton’s voice was strained.

Brian nodded and raised his comm unit. “Dr. Xereng, we’re ready for you now.”

The doctor had apparently been waiting in the break room next door, judging by the speed at which he arrived. “Good morning,” he said, resting a small medical kit at the end of the table. “Which of you am I testing?”

“That would be me,” said Hamilton, pushing her chair back. She walked to the end of the table and stood next to him as he took a device from the kit and attached a small, thin tube to the end of it.

“All right,” he said. “I’m going to take a sample from the inside of your cheek. It will be painless.”

“I know, I’ve done this before.”

“One moment please, Dr. Xereng.” Commander Sandovhar stood up and moved down to the end of the table. “May I?” she asked, holding out her hand. Xereng frowned at her in confusion.

“It’s a standard preservation tube,” he said.

“Yes, I know. And I’d like to see it.”

“I’m sorry, this is a delicate—”

“I’m a doctor,” she interrupted. “I won’t contaminate the opening.”

He looked at Brian, who said, “She’s a Starfleet medical officer. Go ahead.”

With a shrug, Xereng handed over the tool. Sandovhar pulled a
medical tricorder from the pocket of her suit jacket, examined the tube, and handed it back. “Thank you,” she said, pocketing her tricorder.

“Is there a particular reason you needed to scan the tube, Doctor?” asked Brian.

Sandovhar turned to face him. “Yes, there is. If someone wanted to introduce a fast-acting poison into a Human body, this tool would be an efficient way of doing it.”

“Good heavens,” said Charles. “Why on Earth would anyone want to do that?”

“Probably for the same reason someone tried to kill Lynne last night,” said Janeway, and Alison watched intently as Charles’ jaw dropped.

“What?” he gasped. Elise made a similar sound of shock, and Brian’s eyes widened.

“I hope you’re exaggerating,” he said.

“A Cardassian assassin broke into my sleeping quarters armed with a phaser, at least two knives, and a neurotoxin,” said Hamilton. “So no, I don’t think we’re exaggerating.”

Alison was watching all of the officers as closely as she could, but there were simply no signs of any emotion other than shock, surprise and dismay. Someone is a very good actor, she thought.

“How is this possible?” demanded Brian. “No one knew about you! That information was under strict security.”

“Maybe it was, but the news got out anyway,” said Alison. “I heard gossip about it right here in this building within two weeks of your telling me. And I can assure you that information did not come from me.”

“Well it certainly didn’t come from me!” He glared at Charles and Elise. “Do you have something to tell me?”

“I didn’t say anything to anyone here!” said Charles. “I don’t even know anyone in this building other than Dr. Necheyev.”

“Don’t look at me!” Elise held up her hands. “I’m as much in the dark as the rest of you. The only people I told were Mother and Stephen, and they’re family so that hardly counts.”

“Adele wouldn’t have said anything,” said Charles.

Brian’s face darkened as he stared at Elise. “You told your mother and brother.”

“Yes, but—”
He dismissed her with a contemptuous look and turned on Charles. “And you told Adele.”

“Adele is my wife, for god’s sake. And your daughter!”

“Adele is not an officer!” thundered Brian. His furious glare swung back to Elise. “And neither are Melanie or Stephen. Stephen isn’t even on the board! What the hell were you thinking? What possessed you to share highly classified information?”

“And I suppose you didn’t breathe a word to Aunt Catarina!” said Elise in an accusing voice.

“No, I did not! I keep my promises, something I had assumed you would do as well. Do you recall your oath? You signed an oath upon accepting the duty of an officer of this board, to act in the best interests of the Foundation and to safeguard any proprietary information that you learned as a result of your position. I distinctly remember stating that the information regarding Ms. Hamilton was not to go beyond the three of us and Dr. Necheyev. Our CEO apparently remembered that instruction, so I know I wasn’t just talking to myself. I am sadly disappointed in both of you! This is grounds for dismissal from your positions, if not the board altogether! Do you realize you have endangered Ms. Hamilton’s life?”

The room was deadly quiet as he glared from one to the other, his face red with anger. Alison was shocked. In the seven years she’d worked at the Foundation she had never seen so much as a crack in Brian Hamilton’s professional attitude, but now it felt as if she’d stumbled into a family argument. The behavior of both Charles and Elise reinforced the impression; they were sitting back in their chairs with expressions of mingled sulkiness and guilt, neither one making eye contact with Brian.

He sighed. “Well, the damage is done. Now we need to focus on controlling it. Ms. Hamilton, you have my deepest, most sincere apology. Normally I would have waited until the DNA analysis was complete and the papers had been signed, but given the circumstances I am now putting the full resources of this Foundation at your disposal. You have no access to your trust until the legal process is complete, but the Foundation itself will fund any security needs you require until the assassin is found and apprehended.”

“Thank you. But the truth is we don’t have to find the assassin; she’ll find me. We just have to be ready for her next time.”

“And the assassin, though definitely the more immediate danger, is not
the critical one," added Janeway. "Someone hired her. Someone who will gain from Lynne’s death."

"The most obvious beneficiaries are her trust fund managers," said Seven of Nine in a remarkable display of tactlessness. Alison thought she saw a quick smile cross Sandovhar’s face, but her attention was distracted by Brian, who dropped his head into his hands, rubbed his face and looked up again with such an expression of weariness that she actually felt sorry for him.

"I know," he said. "Dr. Xereng, please take your sample and complete that analysis with all possible speed."

"Of course," said the doctor. He had the sample taken and packed up in record time, his discomfort obvious. "I should have the results in an hour."

"Thank you. Call me the moment your findings are complete."

As the door closed behind the doctor, Hamilton made her way back to her seat. "What now?" she asked, settling into the chair.

"Now we wait," said Brian. "When the DNA findings come in, we’ll start the legal paperwork process. In the meantime, would you like a tour?"

"Yes, I would. Dr. Necheyev has already offered."

"Ah. In that case, Dr. Necheyev, I’ll contact you as soon as I hear from Dr. Xereng and we can reconvene here."

Alison nodded and turned to Hamilton. "Since we have an hour to kill, I’ll take you on the non-executive tour."

"How does that differ from the executive one?"

"I show you all the dark and dusty places."

"That sounds interesting," said Elise. "I’ve never seen that part of the tour. Do you mind if I tag along?"

The smile of acceptance Hamilton had been giving Alison instantly dropped from her face. She leaned forward to look past Alison and said, "Actually I do. Sorry to be rude, but at the moment the list of Foundation people I can trust holds exactly one name."

Glancing at Elise, Alison caught a fleeting expression of dismay, followed swiftly by studied indifference. "I suppose that’s true. Well, Dr. Necheyev, it looks like once again you’re the face of the Foundation."

"Not for long," said Alison, rather impolitically. With that she stood and ushered her new employer out the door.
Kathryn had long known the size and scope of the Hamilton Foundation’s operation, but seeing it in action drove the truth home more readily than any amount of prior research. This place was vast, with over three thousand employees all engaged in the business of handing out Hamilton funding and checking on the progress of previously funded research. The granting department alone had seventy staff members screening and evaluating applications.

“In any given funding cycle, we receive in the neighborhood of one thousand applications from all over the Federation,” said Alison, leading the group into yet another glassed hallway with a view of the lobby. “Our grant officers are some of the best minds in astrophysics, temporal mechanics, warp propulsion—”

“Temporal mechanics?” interrupted Kathryn.

“If we can control time, we can control space travel in a whole different way.” Alison smiled at her. It was an expression Kathryn had yet to get used to. With her blond hair, light brown eyes and pronounced Slavic cheekbones, Alison Necheyev looked very much like a slightly taller version of her aunt. But Admiral Necheyev never smiled like that. “But then you know that, Captain,” Alison continued. “I understand you have quite a reputation for getting tangled up in temporal paradoxes.”

A reputation not generally known outside the admiral level of
Starfleet, thought Kathryn. It was clear that Alison and her aunt talked about more than just their lunch order. “Not from any desire on my part, believe me,” she said. “Temporal paradoxes give me a headache.”

“Paradoxes of any kind give me a headache,” said Lynne. “I have a question. If the people in your granting department—”

“Your granting department, Ms. Hamilton. You need to start thinking like the head of the Foundation, not a visitor on tour.”

The expression that ghosted across Lynne’s face telegraphed exactly how she felt about that, but she said only, “Okay, my granting department. At any rate, why are these people here if they’re some of the best minds in their field? Why aren’t they heading their own labs, doing the work instead of funding others to do it?”

“In some cases, because they’re retired from active research. We have a lot of emeritus professors here who like to keep their oar in the academic waters, so to speak. They see cutting edge concepts here that the rest of the scientific world won’t see until publication. In other cases, people come here because they’ve been in the grind of funding their labs and fighting for recognition and they just don’t want that lifestyle anymore. And some of our officers are fresh out of their own advanced degrees; they haven’t even worked in a lab yet. They don’t have the experience of the older officers, but at times that very lack helps them see things that the others don’t.”

“I imagine you have a high turnover rate of those young officers,” said Revi.

“You’re right, we do. They tend to see projects that capture their interest while they’re here. Sometimes their time with us serves to focus their own broader interests in a way that their academic years could not. I don’t let the ratio of young officers get too high, because they’re often a losing investment in terms of training. But I also feel that the Foundation is at its heart a service-oriented entity, and giving young scientific minds a springboard is a service well worth offering.”

“And who makes those kinds of decisions, you or the Board?” asked Lynne.

“Me. The Board concerns itself more with the bottom line and the recruitment of donors. How we arrive to that bottom line is my call. Unless, of course, I screw it up.”
“You recruit donors?” asked Seven. “To what purpose? I believed the Foundation operated with the largest trust in the Federation.”

“We do. But we also fund some of the most expensive research in the Federation. The more we bring in, the more we can send out. Hello, Matthew,” she said to the middle-aged man sitting at the enormous desk they were now passing.

“Dr. Necheyev, you have messages from—”

“Put them in my file pile,” she said without pausing. “I don’t have time right now.” She led them through a door into an expansive corner office with two walls of transparent aluminum, offering a breathtaking view to the west. “My office,” she said, waving them toward the comfortable chairs surrounding the rich wooden conference table. “Can I get anyone a drink?”

“Coffee would be lovely,” said Kathryn, choosing a chair facing the windows.

“For four, then?”

“Tea for two of us, please,” said Revi as she and Seven sat down. “Earl Grey for me.”

“I prefer a Vulcan blend if you have it programmed,” said Seven.

“Of course. Ms. Hamilton?”

Lynne had gone to the windows and was staring at the snow-capped mountains visible in the distance. She made no response to Alison, not even when the question was repeated. Kathryn was just rising from her chair when Alison crossed the floor and laid a hand on Lynne’s arm. “Ms. Hamilton?”

“Hm? Oh...sorry, what did you say?”

“I asked if you’d like something to drink.”

“Sure. Can I get a hot chocolate?”

“Of course.” Alison nodded and made her way to the replicator, while Lynne returned her attention to the view. Kathryn went to stand beside her.

“Comfort food?” she asked softly.

“God, look at them. They’re so beautiful.” Lynne met her eyes. “I need to get out there, Kathryn. I can’t take much more of this.”

“I know. We’ll go as soon as we’re done here. That’s a promise. Just hold on a little while longer.”
“Story of our lives, isn’t it? We’re always just holding on. I look forward to getting past that someday.”

“It will get easier.”

“Sure.” But Lynne’s expression said otherwise. Before Kathryn could say anything else, Alison brought their drinks back to the table.

“Ms. Hamilton, Captain Janeway, if you’d like to have a seat?”

With one last look between them, they turned away from the view and went to collect their drinks.

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The genetic scan was positive, as everyone knew it would be, and a tedious round of paperwork took up the better part of an hour. By prior arrangement with Lynne, Alison checked each document and explained it in layperson’s terms before Lynne signed. A Hamilton employee with a notary license stood by, witnessing the thumbprint signatures and recording the documents in her PADD. When it was all over, Lynne handed the PADD with the legal files to Charles, who smiled and said, “That’s it, then. Give our lawyers a few days to process and register all of these, and the Federation bureaucracy some time to establish your identity in the database, and you’ll be ready to start your new life. In the meantime, welcome to the family.”

“Why would it take days to process legal documents that have already been drawn up and signed?” asked Seven.

“It’s normal, Ms. Nine,” said Alison. Seven frowned.

“You may call me Seven. And that is extremely inefficient.”

“I completely agree,” said Elise. “Anything to do with lawyers and bureaucrats is bound to be a testament to inefficiency. But we’re stuck with the system all the same.”

“If your lawyers and bureaucrats ran Starfleet you would never have beaten the Borg.”

“It’s all right, Seven,” said Lynne. “Dr. Necheyev already warned me about this. We’ll just have to…hold on for a few more days.”

Brian was watching them, his shaggy gray brows bunched together. “I would suggest that you return to Starfleet Headquarters and remain there until your legal identity has been established. You’re vulnerable until then.”
“Believe me, I know.”

“But we still need a means of contacting you,” said Charles. “To let you know when this process is complete.”

Lynne glanced at Alison. “Dr. Necheyev will know our whereabouts. Any message to us can go through her.”

Though Kathryn knew this was news to Alison, the woman covered her surprise well enough that none of the others seemed to notice.

“Good enough,” said Brian. “We have nothing further to discuss regarding your position with the Foundation, at least not until the lawyers have had their day. In the meantime, please refer any security needs you may have to Dr. Necheyev. Doctor, you have the full authority of this Board to finance any such needs for Ms. Hamilton; her safety is currently the highest priority of this institution.”

“Of course,” said Alison.

“Then there is only one thing left.” Brian reached into an archival case on the table and pulled out a PADD. “This is the PADD you left with your parents, Ms. Hamilton. The officers of this Board and Dr. Necheyev have all viewed your message, and I’m sorry for that necessary intrusion on your privacy. But there is a series of files which we have not viewed. They require a password; one which your parents said you would know. They instructed that you should be given the PADD and the password hint, which is…” He pressed a button on the PADD, glanced at the screen, and finished, “…what is it that drove you to climb?”

He rose, and with a scrape of chairs everyone else rose with him. Everyone except Lynne, who sat unmoving in her chair, staring at the PADD in Brian’s hand.

“It was a pleasure to meet you at last,” he said, walking to her and holding out the PADD. She took it silently, holding it as if she were afraid it might shatter in her grasp. After a few seconds she finally realized he was waiting to shake her hand.

“Thank you,” she said hoarsely, taking his hand as she looked around at the others. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone now.”

There was an awkward silence before everyone began moving toward the door. Revi and Seven came around the table to give Lynne a quick hug and, in Revi’s case, an encouraging smile. Seven leaned down and whispered, “We’ll wait as long as you need.”

“Thanks,” said Lynne. “It might be a while.”
“Doesn’t matter,” said Revi. She squeezed Lynne’s shoulder again and followed Seven to the door, shutting it quietly behind them.

Kathryn hung back, unsure as to whether she was included in the request, but Lynne didn’t even seem to notice. Her attention was fixed on the PADD’s dark screen, and finally Kathryn asked, “Do you want me to go, too?”

Lynne looked up with wide eyes. “God, no. Sit down. Please.”

Kathryn sat, watching her stare at the PADD. The silence in the room was immense, growing heavier by the second, and still Lynne made no move to activate the files.

At last Kathryn could bear it no longer. “Do you know the password?”

Lynne nodded. “We had a joke in our family. Mom said I was born with Rocky Mountain spotted fever, and the only cure was to go back to the mountains. She said she could always tell when it had been too long between doses.”

Kathryn had never heard of the disease, and had no idea if it was real or not. But now wasn’t the time to ask. She scooted her chair closer to Lynne’s and reached out for her free hand. Lynne clutched it convulsively, squeezing hard before taking a deep breath and letting go.

“She goes,” she said, and punched in the words Rocky Mountain spotted fever. Her finger shook as she held it over the final key. “Part of me doesn’t want to do this,” she whispered. “It’s going to break my heart.”

“I know,” Kathryn whispered back.

With a slight shake of her head, Lynne sent the password.

The PADD activated immediately, showing a middle-aged man and woman sitting close together, looking quizzically out of the screen. Kathryn would have recognized Elizabeth Hamilton anywhere; she had bequeathed her looks directly to her daughter. The main difference was her pure silver hair and a slightly more rounded face, but the bone structure, the nose, and the full lips were clearly the same.

The large, powerfully built man beside her bore far less visible resemblance to his daughter, save for his startling green eyes. At the moment those eyes were squinting at the screen, one eyebrow raised in an achingly familiar expression.

“Is it working?” asked Elizabeth.

“Yeah. See that light?” He pointed toward the PADD, then leaned back and put his arm around her. “You ready?”
“Not really.” But she smiled and said, “Hello, Lynne.”
Beside her, John Hamilton nodded. “Hey squirt.”
Lynne covered her mouth, the tears already welling in her eyes.
“You might have known that your parents wouldn’t do what you asked them to, wouldn’t you?” he continued.
“Well, I wanted to,” said Elizabeth. “I thought we should respect your wishes. But your father had other ideas.”
“It’s not that I didn’t want to respect your wishes,” he said. “But I figured, if you could leave us a message, why couldn’t we leave you one? Because I don’t doubt for a minute that captain of yours will get you home. We’ve never seen you fall like that for anyone.”
“Never,” agreed Elizabeth. “Nor have I ever seen you look so happy. Love sits very well on you.”
“And you wouldn’t fall like that for someone who wasn’t worth it,” he added. “So that means you’re coming back to Earth someday. And we want this to be waiting for you.”
“Not that we’ve figured out the logistics just yet,” she said.
He smiled at her. “But we will.”
Well, I know where she gets her determination, thought Kathryn. Clearly John Hamilton was a force to be reckoned with.
“We wanted to thank you,” said Elizabeth. “For making sure we knew you were okay. I can’t even tell you what that meant to us. Your message got here five days after you vanished, and the day after the search was called off. There was a big storm moving in over Denali and they just couldn’t keep the search and rescue teams out there any longer. At that point—”
“What?” Lynne stopped the playback. “Five days? Fuck!” She looked at Kathryn. “I told the lawyer to ship the package the day I vanished off Denali! It should have gotten there the next fucking day! Bastards! They couldn’t even handle a simple thing like ‘mail this package on this date?’ My parents thought I was dead!”
“Then you did the right thing with your message, didn’t you?”
Lynne froze in mid-rant, then relaxed. “Yeah,” she said in a wondering tone. “I guess I did.” She turned back to the PADD and resumed the playback.
“—we knew you were dead. Not even you could survive Denali in a storm with no gear. That was…” Elizabeth hesitated. “It was a difficult
time. But then I got a mysterious package in the mail. A very heavy mysteri-
ous package,” she added with a smile. “Phil had to bring it in for me. Re-
member Phil, the mailman?”

Lynne nodded, completely absorbed.

“You can probably imagine how confused I was to see a box of gold bars in my kitchen. But then there was a letter on top, in your handwriting…and then there was this.” She gestured toward the PADD.

“I came home and found your mother sitting at the table looking like she’d seen a ghost,” said John. “She’d been sitting there for an hour.”

“I watched your message over and over again,” Elizabeth admitted. “I couldn’t get enough. I thought maybe if I saw it enough times it would sink in.”

“That was a hell of a story you told,” said John. “If I’d heard that from anyone else I would have told them to go to rehab. But you’re our daughter.”

“Well, the fifty pounds of gold and the twenty-fourth-century electronics were fairly good supporting evidence,” she said, and he smiled.

“True. You really do know how to make an impression, squirt. By the way, just so you know, your investment advice has been spot on so far. The market crash was incredible. All those dotcom millionaires, selling their homes for less than the mortgage.” He shook his head. “I bought the stocks you told us to, but I have to admit I’d never have chosen any of them on my own. I mean…Apple? I couldn’t believe they’d make any money. And then they came out with those iPod things last fall, and my lord the stock jumped.”

“It’s July 24, 2002, by the way,” said Elizabeth. “The anniversary of the day we lived again. We decided to record a message for you every year on this date, so you can see how we’re doing. If you get these someday, then you’ll understand this is as much for us as it is for you. We know you’re okay, but it’s not the same as having you here. I miss talking to you. I—”

Her voice broke, but she managed a tremulous smile and finished, “I just miss you so much. I’d give anything to hear your voice again. Sometimes I swear I see you out of the corner of my eye, sitting on the kitchen counter like you always used to when you dropped by. It’s like your ghost is still here.”

John squeezed her shoulder and said, “But you gave us a priceless gift. Priceless. Knowing you’re okay makes all the difference. It’s like part of

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*Forward Motion*
you is still here, you know? I check the stock pages now and I feel like you’re with me. I can practically hear you saying, ‘No, Dad, I’m serious. It’ll work.’ And it does, too.”

“It does make all the difference,” Elizabeth agreed. “You know what the most difficult part of this has been? Pretending to mourn you. You wouldn’t believe the response, Lynne. Besides our own family and friends, we had your climbing friends ringing us up for months. They’d wander in from whatever corner of the Earth they’d been in, and hear about you, and then we’d get a phone call or a visitor on our doorstep. And everyone was so kind and supportive—god, our freezer was ready to burst with all the food people brought. We had enough casseroles to feed an army. And all the time I wanted to shout at them, ‘She’s not dead!’ I want to tell them what you’ve done, and how proud we are of you, and what a miracle you are…but I can’t.”

“You left us too soon,” said John. “But I’d say that even if you were eighty and I was a hundred and one. There is no possible time when I could have let you go without it hurting. But I know you’re happy, and that’s all I need. So if you’re watching this, I want you to do just one thing for me and your mother. Stay happy. Don’t worry about us. We’re fine.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It was our job to raise you to the point where you could fly on your own. You did that years ago. Every day since then, every visit you made, was just icing on the cake. So many of my friends have such…difficult relationships with their children. Sometimes downright adversarial. We never had that with you—”

“Well, other than your teen years,” said John with a broad grin.

“Let’s not discuss those times.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

“Hey, should we tell her that we knew all along she was smoking pot?”

“Oh my god,” said Lynne out loud.

Elizabeth laughed, almost as if she’d heard her daughter’s reaction. “Actually, I think the better question would be whether she knew her parents smoked it too.”

“Oh my god!” Lynne exclaimed in a shocked voice. “They did?”

John was chuckling as well. “Maybe we should tell her one secret every year.”

“I don’t think we have enough, John. That would only get us through, oh, ten or fifteen messages.”

“Ten or fifteen!” Lynne leaned back in her chair. “Jesus!”
John rubbed a hand along his jaw. “Well, then we could start in on the extended family secrets. I’ll bet she never knew about her Aunt Lila’s polyandry.”

“Oh, stop, you’ll get her all worked up.” Elizabeth looked back at the PADD. “Your Aunt Lila never had her first marriage annulled. It was a big family secret. So your father and I used to tease her about being a bigamist—”

“And she’d just laugh and say life was too short to have only one man on call.” John chuckled again. “Did I pick the right sister or what?”

They went on from there, talking about family events, catching Lynne up on her friends’ lives, and acting for all the world as if they were simply making a long-distance communication. After another ten minutes they wound down again, with John worrying aloud about how much storage capacity the PADD might have.

“If I’m reading this thing right, we’ve got plenty of space and battery power, or whatever you call a power source in the twenty-fourth century,” he said. “But you forgot to leave the instruction manual, so I can’t be sure. At any rate, we’re hoping to have many more chats with you. This felt great.”

“It did, didn’t it?” Elizabeth smiled at him. “Like old times. Because I can imagine her response to everything we said.”

“I bet she’s still reeling over the marijuana thing.”

“Oh, she’ll never get over that one.” They both laughed again.

“We have to go,” said John a moment later. “Don’t you ever forget that we love you.”

“Very, very much,” said Elizabeth, her earlier mirth fading instantly into the sort of pressed-lips expression of a person trying not to cry. “You have been all that we could ever have wanted. So don’t feel bad about doing what you had to do.”

“And keep your Kathryn happy, too,” John added. “Sounds like she deserves it almost as much as you do.”

“And tell her thank you from us. For saving you, and taking such good care of you.”

“Goodbye, Lynne. See you next year.”

“I love you,” Elizabeth said again, her eyes welling up just as John reached toward the PADD. The screen went dark.
Kathryn looked at Lynne, who was staring at the silent PADD. A tear rolled down her cheek, and she wiped it away with a sniff.

“God,” she said. “I didn’t know what to expect, but it sure wasn’t that.” She smiled tremulously. “Can you believe those two?”

“Well, knowing you the way I do, and knowing that they’re your parents...yes.” Kathryn put a careful arm around Lynne’s shoulders and tugged her close for a kiss on the cheek. “And I wish you could tell them from me that they’re very welcome, and it has been my greatest pleasure.”

Lynne carefully put the PADD on the table and folded her hands in her lap.

“Not going to watch any more?”

“I can’t. Not here; not now. I think I’m going to have to parcel these out to myself. It’s...too much.”

“I understand.”

They sat together in silence, broken by a chuckle as Lynne said, “My parents smoked pot! I cannot believe it.”

“And they knew precisely how you’d react, too.”

“Yeah. They knew me pretty well.” Lynne’s smile faded, her face crumpled, and Kathryn wrapped her in her arms as the storm broke. She’d been waiting for it, but that didn’t make it any easier.

“How can it still hurt so much?” Lynne’s voice was muffled in Kathryn’s shoulder, her body shaking as she cried. “It’s been two years and it feels like two days!”

“Because you still love them,” Kathryn said, holding her as best she could given the restrictions imposed by their chairs. “Because you were lucky enough to be loved like that. If it didn’t hurt, what would that say about you? About them?”

Lynne lifted her head, the tears streaming down her face. She wiped them away, sniffed again, and visibly got control of herself. “What a fucking moronic system,” she said, wiping away more tears. “If you love it hurts one way, and if you don’t it hurts another.”

“But if you love you have joy, and if you don’t...” Kathryn shrugged. “You have contentment, maybe. But not joy. I’ve never been a parent, so I can’t speak to what your parents are feeling, but speaking for myself—I’d rather have had the joy of loving you, no matter how much it hurt me, than to have lived my whole life the way I was living it before you came.”
“Me too.” Lynne looked at her with eyes made brilliant by her tears. “I just wish I’d never had to choose.”

“I know.”

Lynne’s gaze dropped to the PADD again, and Kathryn could see another wave approaching. “Come here,” she said, standing up and pushing her chair out of the way. Lynne stood as well, coming into her arms and immediately breaking down again. This time it was worse, and Kathryn couldn’t help her own tears. The raw pain pouring out of Lynne was hurting her heart.

“God, I miss them,” Lynne gasped.

Kathryn could only wrap her more tightly, rocking her as she stroked the back of her head. “I think you always will,” she whispered.
“W**e**re there any problems?”

Alison looked at her aunt’s image on the viewscreen and wondered how she could possibly look so fresh after the day she must have had. “No, everything went just fine. There wasn’t a shadow of doubt in anyone’s mind that Lynne Hamilton is the real thing, so we’re over that hurdle. Now it’s just a matter of waiting until the documents are filed and her identity is formally established. I’ve got her testament sitting in the pipeline. As soon as she has her identity and the signature is valid, that will be filed as well.”

“And then you publicize it.”

“Yes.”

“I’m guessing she’s not pleased with that part of your plan.”

Alison took a sip of her vodka and set it back on the desk in front of the monitor. It had become tradition for them to share a drink during these video conversations, and she found it rather comforting. “No, but she understands the necessity. In her case, publicity is safety.”

The Golden Gate Bridge sparkled behind Admiral Necheyev as she picked up her own drink. “Ironic. That woman is at the center of a storm, and yet I get the feeling that if she had her way, nobody on Earth would ever hear of her. She doesn’t care about the wealth or the power.”

“But everyone else does.” Alison thought about the way Hamilton had
looked when she and Janeway had rejoined them in her office—lost and indescribably sad. “I think you were right when you said she only cares about a few things. And I think one of the things she cares most about is something she’ll never have.”

“Meaning?”

“The Foundation is all she has left of her parents. That’s why the rest of it doesn’t mean anything to her—it doesn’t make up for what she left behind.”

“No, I don’t imagine it would.”

They fell into a silence that wasn’t in the least awkward. By now they were comfortable enough with each other to find silence merely a pause, and not a hole in need of filling.

“Well,” said the Admiral at last, “I’m glad something went right today. I’m guessing you’re no further along in your investigation than you were before, or you would have mentioned it.”

Alison shook her head. “I watched them all like a hawk, but I couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary. They all seemed utterly shocked about the murder attempt—as was I, I might add. Someone didn’t see fit to give me advance warning of that one.”

“That’s because someone was dealing with the legal aftermath of that mess. That happened on Starfleet property, don’t forget. Which means the whole disaster is under our jurisdiction. Not to mention the fact that their location was supposed to be classified information.”

“Have you found anything out?”

Aunt Alynna sighed, running a hand through her hair and settling more comfortably onto her couch. “Nothing useful. Turns out the transporter operator at the Bloomington station talked to someone he thought was a reporter. We have a description of the man, but it’s not very exact. At any rate, we know he lied about his employer, because they have no record of him. He appeared at the station every day, asking about Captain Janeway, which attracted no attention at all since she’s one of the most visible faces in the Federation right now. And he managed to flatter the operator into telling him that Janeway and her friends had gone through the station and onto a Starfleet relay yesterday. It doesn’t take a warp theoretician to figure out that if Janeway and Hamilton went to a Starfleet relay, then they were coming here to San Francisco.”

“That doesn’t explain how they knew she was on Voyager.”

Forward Motion
“No, that part is a little more problematic. Lieutenant Commander Skrellok thinks someone tapped into the relay records, which would be a hell of a feat. He’s checking the logs line by line right now, looking for signs of tampering. Hopefully that will give us some sort of lead, because otherwise we’re at a dead end. Even the blood that woman left on Voyager doesn’t help, because our treaty with the Cardassians doesn’t include biomedical data sharing.”

“Well, at least you know it wasn’t someone inside Starfleet selling them out.”

Her aunt’s expression hardened. “I won’t know that for sure until we have that Cardassian woman in custody. I don’t think she had help inside Starfleet, but we can’t afford to rule anything out.”

Alison drained the glass and held it in her hand, idly turning it in her fingers. “Has it occurred to you that we may never know who hired her? We only have five or six days until Ms. Hamilton’s identity is established and her testament is filed; after that there’s no motive for killing her. The contract will be lifted, because whoever put it out won’t want to risk discovery. And then we’ll be left with practically no evidence and certainly no answers.”

“It’s occurred to me.” The sour look on her aunt’s face made it clear that this was not an outcome she could easily accept. “But better to have no answers and Lynne Hamilton alive than the opposite. Are they safely on their vacation?”

“Are they gone? Yes. Are they safe? I don’t know. They decided not to take any security. We could have had a full detail of private security ready by the end of day, but they felt they’d be more likely to stay anonymous if they went alone than if they were accompanied by guards, no matter how discreet they might be. And then there’s the issue involved in making their location known to more people. I pointed out that a security company that couldn’t keep a secret wouldn’t be in business for long, but Captain Janeway said she wasn’t even sure she could trust Starfleet, let alone a company she had no experience with. So I guess you and she are thinking alike. But they did agree to put a private team around Gretchen Janeway’s property. Did they tell you where they were going?”

“No. When Janeway talked to me from Voyager we couldn’t be sure our conversation was secure. You’re the only one who knows. So don’t talk to any friendly reporters.”
Alison smiled ruefully. “That’s a lesson I learned long before I made CEO.”
SEVEN DROPPED her skis on the snow and looked at them with trepida-
tion. “You must be joking.”

“You’ll love it, Seven. Really.” Revi put down her own skis and
chunked the poles into the snow. “There’s a definite learning curve, but
once you get used to it—it’s like flying.”

“I have no desire to fly.”

“Besides, she’s going to be falling a lot more than flying in the begin-
ning,” said Lynne cheerfully. She dropped one ski and held the other up,
examining the binding. “These things have changed a bit in the last few
hundred years.”

“I would hope so.” Kathryn had just emerged from the lodge with her
own skis; she’d been the last to get fitted. “In your day you ran around on
waxed bits of wood.”

“That was a little before my time, Kathryn. We’d actually progressed
to fiberglas and titanium in my day.” Lynne poked at a small bulge in the
binding. “What’s this?”

“The gyrosopic sensor,” said Revi.

“The what?”

“It senses sudden changes of angle and releases the binding when the
angle goes beyond the programmed parameters.”
“So the skis pop off if you fall,” added Kathryn. “Usually before you hit the ground.”

“Ah.” Lynne nodded. “That makes sense. No more twisted ankles and broken legs from skis going the wrong way in a crash.”

“Precisely,” said Revi. “It amazes me that anyone ever skied without gyroscopic sensors. The potential for injury is completely unacceptable. And you people didn’t even have bone knitters! How could you get on skis knowing that if you fell you could spend the next eight weeks waiting for a fracture to heal?”

“That was part of the fun.” Lynne grinned at her. “The adrenaline rush of knowing that you were riding the ragged edge of disaster.”

“Unbelievable,” grumbled Revi. “How you people ever survived that century, I have no idea.”

“It wasn’t that bad, Revi. We had safety features too. Our bindings were spring loaded, so they’d pop off once a certain pressure was exceeded. Same concept, different solution.”

“That’s not much better. You had to actually fall before the spring released, right?”

“Well...yes.”

“So how often did people end up with torqued knee joints and broken bones anyway?”

“Ah...pretty often, actually.” Lynne turned to Kathryn. “So if I do a jump, the skis will still stay on, right? Because the angle won’t change enough.”

“Right. Freestyle skiers would just disable the sensors, or set them to a much higher tolerance. But you’re not doing any jumping today.”

“Oh, come on, Kath—”

“We are staying together today,” said Kathryn firmly. “Not all of us are expert skiers.”

Seven, who was already uncomfortably out of her element, felt even worse at this. “That’s not necessary,” she said. “There are easy courses for beginners, are there not? I’ll stay there, and you three can go do as you wish. It’s inefficient for all of you to adapt to my lack of skill.”

She felt Revi’s instant rejection of the suggestion, even as Lynne looked over with a clear expression of guilt.

“God, Seven, I’m an ass. I’m sorry. We are not going off and leaving you
here. Besides, I love teaching new skiers, and I’m betting you’ll be a fast learner.”

Seven doubted this, but with Revi’s silent encouragement and both Lynne and Kathryn’s more vocal variety, she at least felt better about making the attempt. They trudged away from the lodge and found a quiet place to don their skis—a task completed quickly by Kathryn and Revi, a little slower by Lynne, who was unfamiliar with the modern bindings, and slowest of all by Seven, who was still questioning the sanity of this entire sport. Thanks to Revi, she understood the historical basis of skis, but what baffled her was why people would do this for recreation when there were far simpler and more comfortable ways to travel across snow.

“All right, here’s a quick briefing for the two of us who haven’t been on a modern ski slope before,” said Kathryn. She pointed at the silver and black badge on her jacket, which each of them had been given along with their replicated gear. “These are short-range commbadges, with the lodge acting as the central processor for signals. The four of us share a unique frequency, so we can talk amongst ourselves without being heard by other skiers. You activate it just the same way you would your normal commbadge. As a safety measure, the lodge picks up all comm-badge frequencies, so if you need to call downslope just ask for the lodge.” She tapped her badge. “Lodge, this is a test of the commbadge system.”

“We hear you,” said a deep male voice. “Badge number 015834, Kathryn Bliss. Correct?”

“Correct. Thank you.”

“Lodge out.”

“Bliss?” Lynne was laughing. “You named us after our wedding planet?”

“Count your blessings,” said Revi. “She named Seven and me after Terellia.”

Kathryn spread her hands. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m not good at thinking up false names. Next time you can try it.”

But Seven understood. “You chose names that represent places where each of us found joy.”

Revi and Lynne looked first at her, then at Kathryn.

“You are such a romantic,” said Lynne. “And I love you for it.”

“I love you too,” said Revi. “But not because you’re a romantic.”
Kathryn looked down, smiling, and Seven detected an increase in her facial epidermal temperature.

“You made her blush, Revi. Stop messing with my wife.”

“Can I help it if she embarrasses so easily?”

“All right, enough!” Kathryn waved them off. “Let me finish.”

“She thinks she’s still the captain,” said Revi in a stage whisper.

“That’s okay, let her,” Lynne whispered back. “It makes her happy.”

Seven was smiling as well, thoroughly enjoying their playful moods. The difference between today and yesterday was pronounced; all of them were far more relaxed this morning. In particular she could hardly believe the change in Lynne. To look at her now, one would never imagine how silent and withdrawn she’d been after the Foundation meeting. If skiing affected Seven’s chosen family this way, then she was willing to give it a chance.

“As I was saying,” said Kathryn firmly, “the commbadges are multipurpose. They also give us access to the transporter kiosks, and they serve as locators should any of us manage to break something despite the gyroscopic sensors. The medical crew will know exactly where you are if you call for assistance.”

“No kidding? Wow. That’s a huge improvement,” said Lynne. “Back in my day we just laid in the snow and moaned until someone could either find the ski patrol or else ski all the way back to the lodge.”

Revi snorted. “Oh yes, those were the good old days. No doubt you moaned quite a bit since you were breaking bones right and left.”

“Have some faith. I never broke a bone skiing. Ever.”

Revi raised her eyebrows.

“I didn’t!”

“Lynne Hamilton, I’m your doctor. I know how many healed fractures you have.”

“But you don’t know how I got them.”

“I don’t think I want to, either.”

“If I may continue?” said Kathryn in an unmistakable voice of command. Both Lynne and Revi looked up, startled.

“She’s being the captain again,” whispered Revi.

“And enjoying it,” Lynne whispered back.

Kathryn took two sidesteps in her skis and shoved Lynne in the chest. Taken completely by surprise, Lynne lost her balance, her arms
pinwheeling until she went over on her back. The skis quietly detached and remained atop the snow, while their owner was nearly invisible in the soft powder.

“Oh, you will so pay for that,” said Lynne from her prone position.

Kathryn began chuckling, and was soon laughing outright as Lynne ineffectually tried to get up. The powder was so deep that every time she put her hands down for support, they simply sank into the snow.

“And now she laughs,” said Lynne, but she was smiling too. “Seven, will you hand me my poles?”

Seven plucked the poles out of the snow, where they had been standing half a meter out of Lynne’s reach. “Is this my first lesson in skiing?” she asked. “How to get up after a fall?”

“Might as well be. Watch and learn—poles are your friends.” Lynne pulled herself into a crouch and used her poles to lever herself upright, then made a great show of shrugging off her pack and slapping the snow off it. “If my hot chocolate gets cold, you’re in even more trouble,” she warned Kathryn as she put the pack on again.

“I’m worried,” said Kathryn. Lynne raised an eyebrow before turning back to Seven.

“After you’re up, make sure you knock the snow off the bottom of your boots before you step into the bindings,” she said, tapping her boot with a pole. “Otherwise you won’t get a good seal, if you even get in at all.” She stepped into one binding, then used her pole for balance as she tapped the other boot. “And make sure that when you get up, your skis are perpendicular to the angle of the slope. Also, it’s best to dig in this side edge a bit once you get on the first ski. That helps keep you from slipping around while you’re trying to get into the second one.”

Absorbed in the lesson, Seven was startled when Lynne suddenly pushed off with her poles, sliding on her single ski right into Kathryn, who was equally surprised and had no time to defend herself. Both women went down in a pile of arms and legs as snow flew into the air. Seven heard laughter, followed by a plea: “No, no! Not down the collar! Nooooooo!”

Kathryn’s voice rose to a pitch that neither Seven nor Revi had ever heard before. They looked at each other, with Seven feeling quite alarmed until she understood from Revi’s thoughts what was happening. For her
part, Revi dissolved into laughter, putting her hands on her knees and bending over.

“Oh, gods!” she gasped. “I never knew her voice could go that high!”

Lynne sat up in the snow and looked over at Seven. “Lesson number two, Seven: how to avenge yourself against a wife who suddenly betrays you.”

Kathryn popped up next to her, frantically brushing snow out of the back of her jacket collar. “You bitch! I can’t believe you did that.”

“You know you deserved it.”

“Seven,” said Kathryn, “if you learn anything from this lesson, let it be that it’s always good to show compassion to your partner. Because if you don’t, you spend the rest of your ski vacation looking over your shoulder.”

With that she plunked a handful of snow on top of Lynne’s head, instantly precipitating another wrestling match. Seven watched with wide eyes as the two of them thrashed in the snow.

: When does the actual skiing begin?:
Revi grinned at her. : When they’ve blown off enough steam. :
: And when will that be?:
Crossing her arms over her chest, Revi answered, : How much steam do they have to blow off?:
Seven sighed. It was going to be a long wait.

~

Lynne had been right; Seven fell more than she flew that first day. Accustomed to much more rapid progress, she found the experience utterly frustrating, but the other three repeatedly assured her that she was learning very rapidly, and she knew from Revi that they were sincere. If this was rapid learning, however, she had no idea how anyone tolerated a more normal pace of acquiring this skill. Where was the enjoyment in continually struggling for balance, skiing at a careful, painfully slow pace, only to eventually fall over anyway? Especially when every fall required extraordinary efforts to rise again.

Then came the moment when she achieved a full run without falling, and suddenly she understood why people did this for recreation. After that she sent Lynne and Kathryn off to ski the expert routes, though it
took some time to persuade them to go, and focused on improving her skills with Revi’s assistance.

The second day they started out together once again, but Seven was skiing well enough on the beginner slope that they soon moved to a different run with a slightly higher difficulty rating. Lynne informed Seven that she’d never seen a quicker study. “Borg reflexes do have their advantages,” she said.

“It’s not just her reflexes,” said Revi. “You should hear what’s going on in her mind. She’s cataloging every single run—the angles she’s tried with knees, skis, elbows—everything. And she’s taking all of those results and building a spatial understanding. It’s really quite amazing.”

“Isn’t that what everyone does?” asked Seven.

Kathryn smiled. “Yes, but not consciously, and over a much longer time period. Not everyone has your mental abilities.”

“Actually I would like to hear that,” said Lynne. “Do you mind if I link in on your next run, Seven?”

“Never mind when you link in.”

It was exhilarating, skiing with both Revi and Lynne present in her mind. They stayed close, skiing beside and behind her, and she felt an indescribable comfort in her tiny collective. When Lynne didn’t pull out of the link at the end of the run, Seven had a sudden hope that perhaps her friend had finally found enough ease in their link to simply leave it open. But two hours later Lynne asked Revi to tune out her frequency, and Seven couldn’t compartmentalize her dismay.

Lynne caught the thought and looked at her sympathetically. : I know. It is getting easier, and I do enjoy it—you know that. But I just can’t do it on a permanent basis the way you two do. It’s…tiring. I’m sorry. :

: Don’t apologize; there is no fault. There is only my selfish wish. :

: Actually, Seven, I think you’re one of the most unselfish people I’ve ever known. :

She nodded at Revi, vanishing from their link a moment later. Sidestepping over, she gave Seven a kiss on the cheek. “And you’re an amazing skier,” she added. “It’s a pleasure to watch you improving.”

“That’s for damn sure,” said Revi. “She’ll be challenging you on the expert runs in a week.”

“Too bad we’re not staying that long.”

“You’re exaggerating,” said Seven. “But I appreciate the compliment.”

As before, Kathryn and Lynne headed for a different part of the moun-
tain after lunch, while Revi and Seven continued to ski together. At the end of the day they reconvened at the lodge, enjoying a sumptuous meal and hot showers, regrettably in that order. Given Kathryn’s fame of the moment, it seemed most prudent for her to appear in public only in ski gear, which made an excellent disguise due to its ubiquity. If she were recognized and her location made public, it would not take their assassin long to guess where Lynne was. But in her bulky sweater and ski pants, with her hair under a cap that she refused to take off despite the relative warmth in the lodge, she remained anonymous. The general voluminos-ness of ski gear aided Seven and Revi as well: though their faces were not on every Fedcomm unit as Kathryn’s was, their Borg implants would have attracted attention had they not been kept covered. Both of them wore headbands to hide most of their optical implants, and kept a thin glove on their left hands—or, in Revi’s case, her clamp. The gloves were designed to mimic skin, and Revi’s was in the shape of a hand. In the crowd of skiers who were still wearing most of their gear, all three of them went unnoticed. And in the event that someone might be scanning their group with something more perceptive than just their eyes, the Borg bands made sure that Lynne, Seven and Revi appeared fully Human to any scans. Kathryn had been checking them with her own tricorder every day since they’d disembarked from *Voyager*.

At the end of the evening they retired to their separate rooms, and for Seven the best part of the day was yet to come. She showered first in order to facilitate her favorite moment, and was already watching from the bed when Revi emerged from the bathroom, clean and naked with her hair slicked back.

Revi leaned against the bathroom doorway and smiled at her. *Anyone would think you’d never seen me naked before.*

*No, but I haven’t seen it enough to tire of the sight yet.* Seven returned her smile. *But what’s even more compelling is how relaxed you are. It makes you even lovelier.*

Revi pushed off the doorway and came to join her in bed. *I know what you mean, because I’ve been watching the same transformation in Lynne. She’s a new woman.*

*Kathryn always said that mountains did something magic for her.*

*I gave up on magic a long time ago.* Revi looked at her thoughtfully. *I’ve had to revise my opinion since then.*

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A Borg who believes in magic. Does that alone not prove its existence?:

Aren’t there two Borg in this room who believe in magic?:

Seven happily settled back against the pillows, watching the fine play of expressions on a face she loved more than anything in the universe. Not for the first time, it occurred to her that the fact of her capacity to love was evidence enough to answer Revi’s playful question.

I believe.

Lynne flopped onto the bed with a gusty sigh. “Every muscle in my body hurts.”

“Am I supposed to feel sorry for you? If you wouldn’t insist on doing the most difficult runs on the mountain, maybe you wouldn’t be so sore. Your body isn’t used to skiing anymore.”

“And that is so unfair. Why is it that I can be in shape for climbing and Vulcan martial arts, but the minute I do something else, I feel like a slug? I think there should be a rule. If you’re in shape for anything, you’re in shape for everything.”

“It does sound like a good rule,” Kathryn agreed. She looked down at Lynne’s sprawled, apparently boneless body and felt her heart swell. These last two days had done wonders for her wife, and in her mind she’d already decided that they had to live somewhere in this area. It wasn’t just mountains in general, she’d realized—it was these mountains, the ones Lynne had grown up with. The day before, when they’d left Seven and Revi and gone to the highest transport kiosk, Lynne had stood on a bare knoll with her and pointed out every single peak by name. She talked about their climbing routes, the flowers that would be coming into bloom in another three months, and the way the succession of plant species chased the melting snow up the peaks. In between ski runs, she heard a bird call and recognized the species without even seeing it. The comfort of familiarity had breathed new life into her, and before Kathryn’s eyes she had transformed into someone entirely different, exuding a bone-deep, relaxed confidence and a sense of belonging that looked very good on her. After two years Kathryn had thought she knew her wife through and through, but these last two days had taught her otherwise. Of course, in hindsight it seemed obvious: she’d never seen Lynne on her own turf.
Now that she had, there was no doubt in her mind that this was where Lynne needed to be.

She dropped a kiss onto Lynne’s lips and just as quickly backed away as arms came around her. “Uh uh,” she said. “You may be clean, but I’m not.”

“You don’t have to be clean just to kiss me.” Lynne put on her best come-hither smile, and Kathryn found it difficult to resist—especially in combination with the warm, newly-showered body that went with it.

“But if I kiss you I might not want to stop. And if that happens, I’d rather more parts of me be clean than just my teeth.”

“Okay, fine.” Lynne sighed theatrically. “But if I’m asleep when you get out, don’t complain.”

“If you’re asleep, I might just take advantage of you anyway.” Kathryn cocked an eyebrow at her and turned for the bathroom, enjoying the look on Lynne’s face.

The hot shower felt fantastic on her own sore muscles. She’d have given a lot for a turn in one of the lodge’s hot tubs, but in their situation it just wasn’t possible. Far too public and far too little camouflaging clothing. But that thought did give her an idea for a future vacation with Lynne, and images of naked skin and steam rising from water left her in a rather tingly state when she stepped out of the shower and towed herself dry. She braced herself for disappointment; Lynne hadn’t exactly been a sexual powerhouse lately. She’d been too stressed in the days leading up to the Foundation meeting, much too stressed the day it had happened, and far too tired last night after her first full day of skiing in more than two years.

Sure enough, when she opened the bathroom door Lynne was sound asleep, lying on her back with her mouth partly open. Kathryn shook her head ruefully as she crossed over to Lynne’s side and pulled the covers up, kissing her gently on the temple before walking around to her own side and sliding in. She was just leaning over to turn out the light when a strong arm pulled her backwards, startling a small squeak out of her.

A very much awake Lynne smiled down at her. “That was a cute sound. Can you do it again?”

“No! Why were you pretending?”

“Because I knew you were expecting me to be too tired again, and I wanted to surprise you. I’m not tired, Kathryn. And you look…edible.”

Lynne pinned her wrists over her head and zeroed in on the sensitive
part of her throat, using just the right amount of pressure in her nuzzling to start Kathryn squirming. When she moved up to an ear and none-too-gently bit the lobe, Kathryn gasped with the force of her body’s instant response. Lynne hadn’t been aggressive in their lovemaking for quite some time—since well before the battle at Terellia, in fact.

“I see the mountains have been good for you in more ways than I’d realized.” Her voice was already raspy.

Lynne moved down to her jaw and worked her way back up to the other ear. “In every way. I have everything I could ever want,” she breathed, her lips mere millimeters away. Kathryn shivered at the sound of her voice so close, so intimate. “I’m home, really home, and you’re here too. And when it comes down to it, there really isn’t anything else.”

She nibbled a line down Kathryn’s throat and circled one breast, deliberately avoiding the nipple. Kathryn realized how tense her body was and forced herself to relax, knowing that Lynne would take her own sweet time. A moment later, when Lynne sucked the nipple into her mouth, she lost her capacity for ordered thought. Had she assumed Lynne would go slow tonight? It appeared she’d miscalculated.

Lynne sat up and pushed Kathryn’s hands under the pillow. “Keep them there,” she said. “If you move them, everything stops.”

“Are you sure?” Kathryn couldn’t resist. “I don’t think you could stop everything.”

Lynne raised an eyebrow at the teasing challenge, then reached down and pinched a nipple just hard enough to get Kathryn’s full attention. “Oh, I’d take care of myself,” she said. “And you’d just have to watch. You could take care of yourself, too, but you wouldn’t get me involved in it. So if you want me to finish what I’m starting here, then you need to lose the attitude and do what I say.”

The force of the pinch increased briefly before releasing, leaving Kathryn breathing hard. “What attitude?” she said.

Lynne’s eyes narrowed as she captured the other nipple and pinched it harder than the first, pulling it outward at the same time. “Do I need to explain?”

Kathryn’s neck and back arched in an involuntary response to the pressure. Rarely was Lynne so aggressive so quickly, and it was beyond arousing. She knew her body was already primed and ready, but she also knew that in this mood, asking Lynne for anything was a guarantee of not
getting it—at least, not until Lynne had decided she’d waited long enough.

“No,” she gasped. “I’m yours.”

It was a phrase that had come to acquire a special meaning at times like this, signifying trust and surrender, and the response was immediate. Her nipple was released, Lynne’s body covered hers, and a moment later she was lost in a passionate kiss that demanded everything. She desperately wanted her hands on Lynne’s back, and the desire combined with the inability to satisfy it sent her arousal even higher.

The kiss lasted longer than usual, ending with Lynne tugging Kathryn’s lower lip in her teeth before shifting position and putting her mouth right next to Kathryn’s ear.

“You are mine,” she whispered fiercely. “Don’t you ever forget it. Don’t you ever think that you’re not enough. Everything is changing for you and me, but that never will.”

She returned for another deep kiss, then shifted position and began working her way down one side of Kathryn’s torso and up the other, rubbing, kissing, biting and massaging; alternating between gentling Kathryn’s responses and firing her up again. Back and forth she went; up and down; venturing out along Kathryn’s arms and returning to her torso. But she never went near her breasts again, despite the fervent strength with which Kathryn was wishing for it.

At last the caresses ceased and a quiet order came. “Roll over, love.”

“I can’t. Not without moving my arms.”

Lynne chuckled. “Oh, very good. You can move your arms, but only to roll over. Put them back under the pillow when you’re through.”

Kathryn pulled her arms out and started to roll, but her body was so limp that it took two attempts to complete the maneuver. She flopped onto her stomach and pushed her arms back under the pillow, appreciating the change in position. This was more comfortable, and she drifted further into the lassitude of prolonged arousal.

“Close your eyes,” whispered Lynne. Kathryn complied; given her relaxed state it was an easy order to obey.

Now began a sweet torture that she’d experienced numerous times under Lynne’s hands. On one memorable occasion she’d returned the favor, in spades, but it remained Lynne’s particular specialty—she had the technique down to a science.
It started with a single fingernail running lightly down her spine, leaving goosebumps in its wake. Then it lifted from the base of her spine and reappeared near her shoulder, touching just long enough to make Kathryn shiver. Once again it vanished, pausing for several seconds before touching down near her waist, in a spot that Lynne knew damn well was sensitive. Kathryn twitched and the touch ended, reappearing immediately on her spine and causing an involuntary arch of her back.

On and on it went, with Kathryn growing ever more sensitized, until the time arrived when her back was arching in mere anticipation of the touch. Her fists were clenched and any relaxation she’d felt earlier was long gone; this was a sensual agony that left her in a constant state of suspense, always waiting for the next touch and never knowing where or when it would be. Her entire body was thrumming with tension, resulting in an explosive reaction to each new touch. The stress built to the point where she was ready to plead for a rest, though she’d never done so before.

And then it stopped.

Kathryn waited, panting, desperately needing the break but not trusting it; knowing that the torture would start again soon. When soft lips brushed her spine she cried out, her back arching so violently that it almost hurt. The change in sensation from hard to soft had nearly undone her, and she could no longer keep silent.

“God! How much longer are you going to do this?”

The answer came with another brush of lips, wringing a second cry out of her. “Until you’re ready,” Lynne answered, her voice low and calm.

“Fuck! I’ve been ready since the first damn kiss!”

“Have you?”

Gentle fingers finally, finally touched her where she needed them most, and she clenched her teeth to keep herself from pleading for what she wanted so desperately.

“Wow,” said Lynne, and Kathryn could hear her smile. “You weren’t kidding.”

Even now she didn’t satisfy, instead taking an eternity to gently spread moisture on ultrasensitive areas, applying just enough pressure to have Kathryn writhing on the bed. At last she paused, slid her fingers down, and pushed them inside. The penetration was slow and steady, going all
the way to the hilt, and Kathryn groaned at the exquisite sense of relief. “God, yes,” she whispered.

“You are unbelievably wet,” Lynne said, pulling her fingers out and thrusting in harder.

Kathryn knew that. It wasn’t just the ease of Lynne’s fingers moving inside her but the lack of total fullness that told her precisely how aroused she actually was. Normally Lynne used two fingers, but tonight it wasn’t enough.

“More,” she rasped. “I want more.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!”

She felt the fingers pull out and waited breathlessly for their return, gasping with pleasure when they re-entered. Finally she had what she needed, a perfect level of penetration—almost too much but not quite—and now it was just a matter of holding on for the ride.

Lynne went slow, gradually getting her accustomed to the extra dimension. Then she settled in, going deeper and faster, then slow again, alternating her speed and depth, never letting Kathryn anticipate the rhythm. She pushed Kathryn to the ragged edge and then, shockingly, pulled out altogether.

“What…” Kathryn couldn’t even finish the sentence.

“Roll over,” Lynne said softly. “I want you on your back. Your arms are free.”

“Oh god.” She was reasonably sure that she couldn’t comply this time. “I can’t move.”

“Yes, you can.” Lynne offered no assistance, merely waiting while Kathryn gathered her wits and her strength. After half an eternity she finally managed to pull her arms from beneath the pillow, brace herself, and roll over. Having taxed her strength to the utmost, she was immediately limp again.

Lynne gently helped her spread her legs, and a moment later the fingers re-entered. This time, though, they were followed with the unbearably sweet touch of a tongue. Kathryn shivered, knowing that she was going to be given her release at last.

It didn’t take long; she was strung so highly already that the added stimulus had her clawing the sheets in what felt like mere seconds. She prayed silently for Lynne to keep going; she just couldn’t handle another
false start. Almost as if she’d heard, Lynne abandoned all variation, finding the perfect speed and settling in for the final push. Kathryn felt her back bending into the bow shape that almost always preceded a powerful orgasm, hanging there for an agonizing minute as the pressure built higher and higher, until it finally released in a slow-motion burst that started in her legs and traveled up her body. The bow of her spine reversed itself and lifted her torso into the air, her body helpless in the grip of an orgasm that seemed to go on forever. At last it let her go and she fell back to the mattress with a gusty sigh, certain that she would never move again. No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than a powerful aftershock ripped through her, jerking her back into the air. Even though Lynne had ceased all movement, she was shaken by two or three more, finally coming to rest utterly depleted of energy.

Lynne stroked her stomach with a flat palm, calming her with the touch and giving Kathryn a few moments to recover before asking, “Are you ready?”

“No. But do it anyway.” She gritted her teeth as Lynne carefully pulled her fingers out. After her orgasm it always felt as if Lynne’s fingers were five centimeters longer, and they took forever to come out. When they finally slipped free she sighed in relief, able to fully relax at last.

Lynne crawled up next to her and encouraged her to roll over one more time, wrapping an arm around her back as Kathryn rested her head on a warm shoulder. She drifted in comfort and post-sexual lassitude, the soft touch of Lynne’s caresses on her back soothing her nearly to the point of sleep.

“You’re beautiful,” whispered Lynne.

Kathryn had no strength to respond except by snuggling in more closely. She listened to Lynne’s breathing, absorbed the touch of the hand on her back, and floated in utter peace until she came back to herself with a startling suddenness. Raising her head, she looked into smiling eyes and said, “We’re going skiing more often.”

Lynne laughed. “Fine by me. You’ll never have to ask.”

“I didn’t think so. Whew, that was…amazing.”

“You were amazing. I couldn’t believe it when you asked for another finger.”

“Two just wasn’t enough this time.”

Lynne looked at her with a knowing smile. “I didn’t start with two.”
Kathryn stared. “But…”
“You were incredibly wet. I thought you could handle three, so that’s what I started with. I wanted you to really feel it.”
“That was four?”
The smile expanded into a full grin. “As I said, you were amazing.”
Kathryn dropped her head back down. “I can’t believe it. I’ve never done that before.”
“Yes, I know.”
“Of course you do. I’m just…I’m stunned.”
Squeezing her gently, Lynne said, “I was too. But I wasn’t about to ask any questions. I just figured you really liked skiing.”
Kathryn snorted, then dissolved into laughter. “Who knew?” she said.
“If my sexual response depends on skiing, then we’re in trouble when I ship out again.”
“Which won’t be for a year at least, I hope. And no more seven-year missions.”
“I think I can almost guarantee that.”
“Good. Otherwise I won’t give Starfleet any funding.”
Kathryn raised her head again. “Well, well, well. I see the power is already going to your head.”
“Actually, it went to my hand first,” said Lynne, not quite managing to keep a straight face.
“God.” Kathryn tried not to laugh, but it was impossible. “Now you’re going to be insufferable.”
“Like you aren’t already. I think I have a ways to go to catch up with you.”
Kathryn gave that due consideration before nodding and saying, “True. I guess you’ll just have to practice.”
The third morning found them on the easier slopes once again, with Lynne, Kathryn and Revi all working together to help Seven improve. She found it most instructive to ski directly behind each of them in turn, watching the way their bodies moved and imitating what she saw. Revi and Kathryn skied in a similar style, which was quite different from the style Lynne employed. Seven theorized that this was a result of the women learning their skills at very different times, but when she brought the subject up, Lynne pointed out that she’d overlooked another factor: Revi and Kathryn were both shorter, and therefore moved differently simply as a matter of biomechanics.

With that in mind, it became clear that the person for Seven to imitate was Lynne, whose rangy body more closely approximated her own. So she and Lynne stayed together while Revi took a turn with Kathryn on the more difficult runs, and Seven had the added enjoyment of feeling Revi’s exhilaration as she plunged down a steep slope at high speeds.

“I look forward to feeling that for myself,” she told Lynne.

“You’ll get there. Not this trip, and not the next, but sooner than most people. Really, Seven, I’ve never seen anyone learn so fast. It’s a pleasure to teach you.”

“You’re an excellent teacher.”

Lynne smiled. “We’re a mutual admiration society is what we are.
Actually, I think you’re ready to go up a notch. Want to try another slope?”

“Will it have fewer people than this one?”

“Last I saw, it did. Usually the numbers go down as the angle goes up.”

“Good,” said Seven firmly. “I find it...disconcerting to be around so many people who have no external awareness.” More than a few times she’d had to make abrupt directional changes to avoid a crash with another skier who apparently thought she or he was alone on the mountain. She supposed that it had at least helped to hone her skill.

“Yeah, that’s the worst thing about the bunny slopes.”

“The what?”

“Oh. Beginner slopes. And no, I don’t know why we called them bunny slopes,” she added, forestalling Seven’s next question. “But they’re full of idiots. And even people who aren’t idiots are often so focused on what they’re learning that they never lift their head and look around. That’s the nice thing about getting better—you leave those people behind.”

“One more reason to improve.”

They made their way to the nearest transporter kiosk, where Lynne named the run she wanted. The operator nodded as they stepped onto the platform, and a moment later they materialized upslope on a new run.

“That’s the biggest change in skiing since I was last here,” said Lynne as they sat on the outside bench and put on their skis. “No chairlifts. I’m kind of torn about that—the transporter kiosks are so much better environmentally, but...there was something so wonderful about sitting in a lift and going up the mountain. The views were amazing, and I’d always get this tingly feeling of anticipation as we went higher and higher—it was such a thrill.”

“Perhaps it was the tingly feeling of anticipation that you could fall off the lift and die,” said Seven pragmatically. Lynne had described the concept of chairlifts to the group on their first day, and Revi’s reaction was still strong in her mind.

“You’ve been around Revi too long.”

“No, I haven’t.”

Lynne stopped and looked at her, then shook her head with a smile. “You’re absolutely right.”

Their skis on and packs settled, they made their way to the edge of the
run, where Lynne encompassed the view with an arm gesture. “So, what do you think? Are you ready?”

Seven looked down in some alarm. “I’m not certain.”

“It’s not as steep as it looks.”

“It’s a sixteen-degree slope. The last one was twelve. It looks precisely as steep as it is.”

“Okay, let me rephrase. It’s not as different as it looks. Yes, it’s steeper, but the skills you need for it are exactly the same ones I’ve been watching you use on the last slope. You’re ready for it. And if you fall—so what? You’ve done that before, too.”

Seven stared at the slope, imagining her run down it and picturing how it would be. The more she looked, the more she realized that only one variable would change, and that was speed. The turns would not need to be any tighter; the balance and technique she’d learned would be just the same. And there were only four skiers on the entire run; she had all the room she needed.

“Very well,” she decided, and pushed off the edge.

“Whoa! Seven!” Lynne’s shout of surprise was quickly behind her as she flew down the slope, gathering speed. The wind whistled in her ears as she leaned into her first turn, smiling at the ease with which her skis cut into the snow and changed her direction. She had just learned one more equation to fit into her mathematical understanding of this sport: greater velocity meant faster ski response time. She turned again, and wondered at what point that equation would top out. There had to be a velocity beyond which the ski response time either leveled out or actually decreased; at what velocity, or which angle of slope, did that happen? She made a mental note to ask Lynne.

A whoop sounded on her left, and a moment later Lynne appeared in her peripheral vision, skiing on a parallel course and matching her turns. “Yeah!” she shouted. “You’re doing great!”

Seven’s smile widened as she flew down the slope, executing one turn after another in her pursuit of skiing perfection. It was easily the most enjoyment she’d had so far on these slopes, and she now understood the attraction people felt for this sport.

Two hundred meters from the bottom of the run she learned yet another equation: greater velocity also meant a much greater sliding distance in a fall.
They met Revi and Kathryn for a late picnic lunch atop a knoll near a transport kiosk, with a sweeping view to the northwest. The sky was blue, the air was still, and the thermal properties of the sun were so strong that all of them had taken off their jackets. As they ate their sandwiches, Lynne enthusiastically described Seven’s progress.

“Four perfect runs in a row! And really nice turns; looked like she’d been skiing for two years.”

“I felt it,” said Revi, smiling over at her. “I think we’ve made a convert.”

“I admit I prejudged the sport,” said Seven. “It is…fun.”

Kathryn laughed. “I remember when you thought ‘fun’ was inefficient.”

“From a Borg standpoint it is. But when applied to the purpose of reducing stress, it’s extremely efficient. My evidence sits before me.” She indicated all three of them.

“And you don’t think you’re included in this evidence?” asked Revi.

“I was not stressed.”

They smiled at each other, then at her.

“I wasn’t!” she insisted.

“Okay,” said Revi. “But you sure feel different in my mind than you did three days ago.”

“Three days ago I was worried about Lynne.”

Revi raised an eyebrow and bit into her sandwich. : You just made my point for me. :

Seven let out an exasperated breath as she reached for her cup of hot cocoa. “Sometimes there are disadvantages to an interlink,” she said.

“Sometimes there are advantages, too,” said Lynne. “For instance, you can’t put any bullshit over on your partner.” She winked and sipped her own hot cocoa.

“Good thing we don’t have one, then,” said Kathryn.

After lunch Lynne decided she’d had enough practice to ‘tackle the monster,’ as she put it. Seven had already heard all about it: the most diffi-
cult run on the mountain and one that only a handful of skiers even attempted. A forty-three degree slope with chutes, edges and bowls, it was not officially a part of the resort and therefore not groomed or patrolled.

“I’m not sure I can watch,” said Revi.

“I can,” said Seven, who was suddenly quite curious. If a mere four-degree difference of slope angle had looked so much steeper, what would a difference of twenty-seven degrees look like?

“Well, you’re both welcome to come see,” said Lynne. “Kathryn, are you ready for it?”

“I’m ready.”

“You’re just as insane as she is,” said Revi. “Aren’t you supposed to be the voice of reason?”

Kathryn grinned at her. “I’m not the captain anymore, remember?”

But when they arrived at the top of the run and peered over, Seven was inclined to agree with Revi. This wasn’t a run, it was a cliff. She couldn’t imagine setting her skis on that.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” said Lynne happily. “Look at that—no tracks!”

“That’s because everyone else on this mountain has common sense,” Revi said.

“More fun for us, then.” Lynne shrugged her pack off, pulled out a water bottle and took a long drink.

“Why bother? You’re just going to pee that out when you terrify yourself,” said Revi, and Lynne choked with laughter, quickly pulling the bottle away and wiping her chin.

“Nice. You could have waited until I was done drinking.”

Revi crossed her arms over her chest but was unable to hide her smile.

“No, I don’t think so.”

Seven had thought Lynne and Kathryn would start their run immediately, but apparently there was a great deal of preparation to be done first. Lynne pulled a pair of field glasses from her pack and scanned both the slope and the terrain to either side, explaining as she did so that she was checking for cracks in the snow and signs of prior avalanches. “The best sign of avalanche danger is other avalanches,” she said. “If any part of the snowpack is unstable, then all of it in that area is suspect, because it’s all connected.”

Having ruled that out, she and Kathryn traded the field glasses back
and forth, studying the slope below and deciding in advance which lines they would take. Only when they had planned the entire route did they pack up and position themselves. Lynne would go first, and after giving her a 100-meter head start, Kathryn would follow.

Seven watched Lynne tap her gloved fists together twice before planting her poles hard and pushing herself over. She gained an astonishing amount of speed in mere seconds, doing jump turns in the steep, narrow chute at the top of the run before flying out the chute and starting a series of long, curving turns. Kathryn flashed over the edge then, following Lynne’s tracks down.

They looked like a trained team, spraying walls of snow with every turn, and when Lynne jumped an edge and landed far downslope without any discernible effort, Seven thought that there was a kind of beauty in the perfection of the movement.

: Don’t tell her I said so, but I think you’re right. :

Seven glanced at Revi, smiling, but her smile dropped as a flash caught her eye. Revi wheeled, searching for what Seven had seen, and a moment later they both found the source: sunlight reflecting off metal. Someone was on the western slope above the ski run. Seven adjusted her optical implant for the distance and felt a frisson of fear go down her spine when she made out three figures standing in the snow, with at least two phaser rifles among them—and both rifles were pointed toward the skiers.

Revi activated Lynne’s frequency and instantly shared the image they’d just seen, while Seven slapped her commbadge and shouted a warning to Kathryn. But they knew their friends had nowhere to go.

Lynne made a sudden diversion from her path, veering toward the assassins as a phaser bolt struck the snow behind her. Abruptly she changed direction again, throwing off a second shot, and headed straight down. She hit an edge and was airborne, an easy shot for a trained killer. But even as Seven and Revi waited in dread, she flipped backwards into a tight ball, her skis flying off in opposite directions. A third shot missed by a hair just before she dropped out of sight below the edge. Nor did she reappear, though her skis did, tumbling downhill on their own.

: Lynne! : It was a dual cry, an instinctive mental shout of horror; but Lynne was still with them, her thoughts as clear as always, even as her voice came through their commbadges.

“Kathryn! Keep going!”
If Kathryn heard she paid no attention, making straight for the edge Lynne had jumped and coming to a stop in an enormous spray of snow. Then she pushed off again, tipped over the edge and vanished.

~

**Kathryn was exulting** in the speed of her descent and the joy of watching Lynne in front of her. She carved turn after turn, following the line she and Lynne had planned, and when the first jump came she let out a whoop of pure happiness as she soared through the air. Her landing was good and she was on to the next line, preparing herself for the upcoming chute that required a careful entrance.

Her commbadge came to life and she heard Seven shouting something, but with the wind in her ears she couldn't make it out. Lynne veered abruptly to the right just as a phaser bolt lanced into the snow behind her, and in a heart-stopping moment Kathryn knew what Seven had been trying to tell her. Even as she changed her own line, chasing after Lynne, she saw her wife veer again, dodging another bolt, and jump an edge they’d never planned to jump, self-destructing in midair as her skis went flying. A third shot sliced through the air, barely missing her falling body.

Kathryn was nearly petrified with fear, but a second later Lynne’s voice came over her commbadge. This time, perhaps because she was expecting it, she made out the words.

“**Kathryn! Keep going!**”

She ignored it, keeping her eyes fixed on the place where she’d last seen Lynne and rocketing toward it. Maybe the assassin would target her, maybe not, but she was not leaving Lynne behind.

As the jump approached she flipped her skis ninety degrees, twisted her body and slammed down on the edges, spraying snow in a wall higher than her head. When most of her speed was bled off she turned again, pushed off with her poles and went over. It was a huge risk; without her prior momentum she could land on a pile of rocks unless the jump was sheer enough. She didn’t care.

It wasn’t quite sheer, but the rocks were angled and covered with enough snow that she managed to skip off them and plunge into the deeper powder at their base. Stopping immediately, she looked around and saw the aftermath of the snow explosion that Lynne had made when
she’d hit the bottom and rolled. Just above it was Lynne herself, lurching
the last few steps to the base of the wall.

“Lynne!”

“I’m okay! Get up here!”

Kathryn crossed the snow separating them and side-stepped back up,
popping her bindings as soon as she reached Lynne and flopping into the
snow beside her. “Thank god you’re all right!”

They clung to each other for a bare moment before Lynne pushed her
away again. “What the fuck did you think you were doing? You were a
perfect target up there!”

“I’m not the one they’re after.”

“You—” Lynne stopped, blowing out an angry breath. “Goddammit.
We’ll talk about this later; they’re already moving.” She yanked off her
gloves, unzipped a pouch on her pack and pulled out a phaser, with
Kathryn following suit.

“Where are they?” she asked.

“We can’t see them from here. Which is good, because they can’t see
us either. But Revi says they’re moving downslope; we’ve only got a few
minutes before we’re in range again. There are three of them on snow-
shoes. Seven thinks they’re Cardassians.”

“Three?”

Lynne gave her a humorless smile. “Yeah. I guess they pulled out all
the stops this time. But they’re fucking with us in my mountains, and they
don’t know shit about snow. They’re up there in a damned avalanche
path, and we’re going pull the trigger.”

“I thought you said there wasn’t any avalanche danger!”

“There wasn’t—for us. Listen. They’re below a wind slab, which
means there’s a whole slope of snow just waiting for a reason to come
down on their heads. All it needs is a little weight to break it loose. So
we’re going to drop a cornice on it.”

Kathryn understood. “We’re going to undercut the snow at the top of
the ridge.”

“Right. We need to step out just far enough to see right there—” she
pointed up at the rock wall beside them, giving Kathryn an idea of the
angle— “and then you’ll see them, and a big lump of snow above them.
Find the cornice above that lump and cut from the right side to the center.
I’ll start from the left.”
“Got it.”
“I’ve called the lodge,” said Revi through their commbadges. “Help is on the way.”
“They won’t get here in time.” Lynne was already moving out from the wall.
“And they’ll be local law enforcement,” said Kathryn, staying right beside her. “They’re not exactly used to dealing with professional assassins.”
Lynne craned her neck out, then ducked back. “One more step,” she said. “They’re still moving; they won’t be expecting this. Ready?”
“I’m ready.”
“On three. One…two…three.”
Together they took the final step out from their shelter. Lynne began firing immediately, having had the advantage of knowing precisely where to shoot. Kathryn followed the line of her phaser and saw the situation at a glance. Three figures high up on the western slope, hunching through the snow, and above them the lump Lynne had spoken of. It was enormous, starting well behind the figures and ending ahead of them; they’d have no chance of escape.
She targeted the overhang of snow at the ridgetop, cutting in to meet Lynne’s beam. She could have wished for a phaser rifle instead of a hand phaser, but their target was huge and they didn’t have to be precise. All they needed to do was hold the beam steady.
The Cardassians stopped moving and Kathryn knew they only had one or two seconds more before they were easy targets once again. Then the cornice broke loose and Lynne shouted, “Get back!”
They jumped upslope, back into the shelter of their wall, and listened to a series of sounds Kathryn had never heard before. A whumpf, a sharp crack, and then a rumble that grew into a frightening roar. It seemed to last for hours before abruptly shifting to a much quieter sshhhhhhh of snow sliding over snow. Eventually even that slowed to a trickle, then a whisper, until finally all sound died away. The silence was deafening.
Kathryn looked over at Lynne, who was resting her head against the rock wall behind them, her eyes closed. Reaching out, she took Lynne’s cold hand in her own and gripped it tightly, watching as green eyes opened and met hers.
“They’re gone,” Lynne said. “I watched it through Revi and Seven.
They never had a chance; the whole slab broke loose. It must have been like having a ten-story building drop on their heads.”

Kathryn squeezed her hand again, then tapped her commbadge. “Everyone all right up there?” she asked.

“Gods above, you scared us!” said Revi. “We’re fine, except for the cardiac arrythmia.”

“The assassins have been neutralized,” said Seven in a calmer voice. “But we don’t know if there are others. I suggest we leave at once.”

“I suggest,” said Lynne grimly, “that we make a beeline for Alison Necheyev’s house. I have a few questions to ask her.”

Kathryn stared at her, the realization making her feel suddenly ill. Alison Necheyev was the only person on Earth who’d known where they were.
Only half of the distress call reached Gohat; it was cut off before Dukali could finish. His hands steady despite the sudden pounding of his heart, Gohat activated the transporter and evacuated the team, wondering what could possibly have made Dukali’s voice sound like that.

When the shattered bodies of his companions materialized, he stood stunned for a moment before racing from the control panel to the transporter platform. Dropping to his knees beside Dukali, who was closest, he pressed his fingers to the vein that ran along the base of the neck ridge. Nothing.

He rose, stepped over Dukali’s body and crouched next to Nivel, a choked sob breaking from him when he found no pulse there, either. But before he could get to Lira, she rolled her head and exhaled, a bubbling sound coming from her throat.

“Lira!” He was beside her in a moment, cradling her head in his hands. “What happened?”

She opened her eyes and looked at him blankly. “Don’t know. The mountain fell.”

“It fell? What do you mean?”

She sighed, a moist sound. “Dukali missed. She knew. She knew and she dodged him. Nivel missed too. And then we had—” A cough racked her body, a horrible wet cough that made his skin crawl. “We had no line
of sight,” she finished weakly. “So we were moving down...she had nowhere to go...we couldn’t miss again. And then both of them came out and fired phasers, but not at us. Over our heads. And the mountain fell.”

“I don’t understand! How did she dodge you? And how can a mountain just fall?”

She shook her head slightly, then closed her eyes.

“Lira! Answer me!” Panic made his voice harsh, but she couldn’t hear him. He pressed his fingers against her neck ridge and felt the fading pulse. They had no access to a doctor; nothing but a basic medical kit aboard. There was nothing he could do. He held her hand, providing a Cardassian touch to keep her company as she crossed over, and waited with her. It didn’t take long.

As he moved about the ship, resolutely preparing their bodies for disposal, he racked his brain to understand what had gone wrong.

They’d known the day Hamilton left Denver where she was going, but a crowded ski lodge wasn’t a good place for a Cardassian to appear asking questions. They sent their Human contact there instead, and it had taken him a full day to acquire the commbadge numbers they needed. With that information in hand, they could track Hamilton’s location on the mountain thanks to the locator in her commbadge. For some reason, scanning for Borg components had not been effective; the Humans must have found some way to disguise them. The commbadge locator took care of that problem, but since they had no access to the resort’s tracking system, the locator data wasn’t exact enough for a beamout. But it was close enough for their purpose.

The second day was spent studying both the mountain’s topography and Hamilton’s movements; Dukali wanted no mistakes this time and was not about to authorize another attempt until they had planned it to the last detail. They acquired the snowshoes they needed to maneuver, and Dukali, Nivel and Lira had spent hours practicing with them on a remote part of the mountain well away from any skier activity. It had been very difficult. Cardassia was a hot planet with no snow, and none of them had much experience moving on such a slippery surface. Skis were out of the question; they had no time to learn and could not be stable enough on them for a shot. But snowshoes were very stable and far easier to get used to, and on the third day Dukali had pronounced them ready.

As expected, Hamilton repeated her movements of the prior day and
headed for the less-trafficked parts of the mountain by midday. In fact, after a prolonged stop near a transporter kiosk, her signal appeared at the top of a run that was completely devoid of other skiers. Gohat remembered how Dukali had thanked their victim for making it so easy, and they’d all laughed. This was far simpler than defeating security measures on a starship. They consulted their three-dimensional topographical map and found the perfect place for Gohat to beam the strike team: a high slope facing an open bowl that Hamilton would have to traverse. It would be a simple matter of picking her off while she was in the open; a quick and untraceable hit. The use of a high-energy phaser rifle would leave not even a molecule of evidence behind.

So what had happened?

Lira said the mountain had fallen on them. Hamilton and one of her companions had opened fire above their heads, and the mountain fell afterwards. And the entire strike team had been covered with snow when Gohat had beamed them back, almost as if they’d been buried.

He went to the computer, accessed the Federation database, narrowed the parameters to Earth and began a search on the keywords mountain, snow, fall, and death. Seconds after the results appeared, he was reading about a phenomenon called an avalanche. A little more research revealed that in ski resorts, patrollers intentionally caused avalanches in order to make the area safe for skiers.

The two Humans must have known what would happen. They’d made it happen. They’d caused an avalanche and buried his team. Not just his team—his friends, his only real companions since the destruction of the Obsidian Order. They were the only family he had left. And now they were gone, killed in one stroke by a woman who was supposed to be dead even now.

Walking slowly back to the transporter controls, he took one last look at the now-arranged bodies and then beamed them into space. The wide-dispersal beam would scatter their atoms, returning them to the components from which all existence came.

“Be one with all, my friends,” he whispered. “And know that I will make this right.”
The local police who plucked them off the mountain were more than a little skeptical of a story about Cardassian assassins, and insisted on taking them to their station to “straighten out the story,” as one of the officers put it. Kathryn had neither the time nor the patience for this, but she was a Starfleet officer and could not simply walk out on her legal obligations. So they went to the station and, with varying levels of patience—Lynne having none whatsoever—answered their questions. The revelation that they had the most famous captain in Starfleet sitting in their headquarters dramatically altered the officers’ attitudes, but protocol still had to be observed, and it was another three hours before the women could wrap up their statements and leave. In the meantime, police craft with sensors and onboard transporters had been dispatched to the avalanche site; they returned with two Cardassian phaser rifles, three snowshoes, a few scraps of clothing and no bodies. Clearly the assassins had been beamed out, but—judging by the scatter pattern of the evidence—not before the weight of the avalanche had impacted. It was highly unlikely any of them had survived.

By now the police were determined to be of as much assistance as they could, so the group returned to the lodge with a full and very visible escort. Officers stood by as the women gathered their bags and returned
their gear, attracting no end of attention from bystanders. As the group made its way through the corridors to the exit, Kathryn heard the surprised comments about her identity and vocal curiosity regarding her companions. Their cover was well and thoroughly blown, and the attention they were drawing validated their earlier decision not to use a private security firm. Going anywhere in a crowd like this, regardless of whether the protectors were in uniform, simply drew too much attention.

Nevertheless, she was genuinely grateful for the police assistance and made sure they knew it. If there were any more Cardassians working this contract, she wanted as much protection around Lynne as possible until they could get off the mountain. Once they were gone, they could vanish into obscurity again. Which was precisely what she planned to do, despite the police chief’s offer to coordinate a security escort for them at their destination.

“Thank you for your kind offer,” she told him. “But if the reaction of the people at the lodge is any indication, we’re safer on our own for the time being.”

“Captain Janeway, please reconsider. Ms. Hamilton is the target of some very professional killers. Surely you would benefit from as much protection as possible.”

“At this point—”

“Excuse me, Chief, but this isn’t Captain Janeway’s decision,” interrupted Lynne. “It’s mine. And I’ve made it.” As he shook his head she added, “Exactly what could your officers have done to protect me on that ski run? Not a damn thing and you know it. Not unless you had snipers posted at the top of the run. And since you can’t possibly post snipers on top of every building and around every corner no matter where I go, it’s pointless. That kind of protection would only attract more attention than I need. In a few days it won’t be an issue anymore, and until then I don’t plan to make my every move behind a wall of people in uniform. So thanks for your offer, but the answer is no.”

Kathryn scrambled to compensate for Lynne’s less-than-tactful behavior, mollifying the Chief and then taking her wife aside for a furious exchange of whispers.

“These people are trying to help us. Do you think you could show just a little more diplomacy here?”
“No, I do not!” Lynne glared at her. “I’m the one getting shot at and for the last three hours everyone seems to be talking to you. I’m tired of being Captain Janeway’s wife and having everyone defer to you for the decisions that I should be making. It’s my life. And I want the hell out of here. So let’s wrap this up and go, because I’ve got a few questions of my own, and they’re not getting answered here.”

She turned and walked to the station’s transporter operator, who had been waiting for his instructions. Kathryn looked after her, shocked by the way she’d said ‘Captain Janeway’s wife.’

A touch on her arm brought her head around to see Revi and Seven standing just behind her.

“You heard,” she said.

They nodded. “Don’t take it to heart,” said Revi. “She didn’t mean it the way it sounded.”

“I know.” And she did, but somehow that didn’t help as much as it should have.

“She’s angry,” said Seven. “And frightened. I can tell you from experience that this particular combination of emotions tends to override verbal tact.”

Kathryn smiled in spite of herself; Seven talking about tact was like a Ferengi talking about philanthropy. “Not that she’s ever had a great deal of it to begin with,” she said, trying to ease the tension. It worked, but only until Lynne returned, radiating impatience.

“The operator is ready. Are we?” she asked, clearly expecting a rapid and affirmative response. Kathryn nodded, wanting to get Lynne out of there before she burned any bridges they might need later. After a final thank you to the police, they mounted the station’s transporter platform.

Being transported directly from the police station had the advantage of keeping any record of their transport out of the main data channels. Unless an assassin had an informant inside the station’s transporter room, there was no way anyone could know where they’d gone. They could be on a remote island in Oceania, the bustle of Tokyo, or even on an orbiting ship.

In reality they were now in the Denver transport station, lost in an enormous crowd of people. Kathryn noticed Seven edging closer to Revi, her discomfort clear. For a woman who’d spent most of her life in a
humanoid version of a bee hive, she had very little tolerance for dense crowds. Kathryn wasn’t fond of them either, but at the moment they served her purpose. In their traveling clothes they were simply four human women among thousands of beings of all sizes, species and gender, all hurrying on to their destinations and paying little attention to anyone else.

They stopped at the first available locator kiosk to look for Alison Necheyev’s address, but she wasn’t in the public database.

“That’s not unusual for high-profile people,” said Kathryn. “We’re going to have to tap into the main Federation database and track her down from her Fedcomm code. Seven, can you—”

“Yes,” said Seven. “Perhaps you should stand behind me so that I won’t be visible.”

“And now you’re reading my mind, too,” Kathryn observed as all three of them formed a wall behind Seven, blocking her from the foot traffic.

“Not your mind, just your intentions.” Seven plunged her assimilation tubules into the kiosk’s board and went rigid.

“What’s that like?” whispered Lynne to Revi.

“Like swimming through conduits of numbers. Want to see?”

“No, I don’t think so. That really doesn’t sound very appealing.”

“Seven enjoys it. Computers are black and white and entirely literal.”

“I can see the attraction for her,” whispered Kathryn.

“Why are you whispering?” asked Revi. “She’s not hearing anything right now; her mind isn’t here.”

“Oh, that’s right,” said Lynne in a normal tone. “When she did this on the Arnett ship she didn’t even notice that she’d been shot in the leg.”

“Now there’s a memory I don’t care to revisit.” Revi put a protective hand on Seven’s shoulder just as they all heard the sound of assimilation tubules withdrawing. Seven turned to regard them with a raised eyebrow.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, no.” Kathryn shook her head. “We were just…reminiscing.”

Seven glanced briefly at Revi, then back at Kathryn. “I am unlikely to be caught in a firefight in the Denver transport station.”

“That’s what I thought about skiing, too,” said Lynne. “Did you get it?”

“Of course. Alison Necheyev lives within hovercraft distance. If we can get a craft I’ll take us there.”
“Not a problem,” said Kathryn.

Half an hour later they were in a rented hovercraft, speeding north-west of Denver with Seven at the controls. From the front passenger seat, Lynne—who had relaxed considerably now that they were on a course of action—provided a running commentary of where they were and how different things looked.

“Where exactly did you live?” asked Revi. “You always just said ‘a little town in the Colorado Rockies’.”

“IIdaho Springs,” she answered. “About fifty kilometers west of Denver. Most folks there were either descendants of the gold miners, retirees, or people working up at Loveland.”

“Loveland?”

“The nearest ski area. Actually one of the best in Colorado for powder. I was on skis at Loveland practically before I could walk.”

“Did your parents ski as well?” asked Seven.

“They were the ones who taught me. I never knew anyone who didn’t ski until I went to university. Then I started meeting people who’d grown up in places like Kansas or Florida and had never even seen a mountain before, much less skied one. I taught a lot of friends to ski.”

“And you’re still doing it,” said Kathryn, earning a brief smile.

“It’s a little different these days,” she said. “My friends then tended to be slightly more provincial.”

But Lynne’s improved attitude was only a temporary respite. As they drew closer to their destination, she became quieter and visibly more tense. Kathryn understood; Alison Necheyev was the one person at the Foundation they had believed to be safe. She hoped against hope that their suspicions were wrong, but it was difficult to see an alternative. It was even more difficult to see what the suspicion was doing to her wife.

“We’re here,” announced Seven a few minutes later, bringing the craft to a halt without landing it. “Sensors show a security field; we’re receiving an automated message.”

“What does it say?” asked Kathryn.

Lynne leaned over to check the board. “Essentially it says ‘get lost’.”

“It says unauthorized entry is not allowed,” corrected Seven.

“Same thing.”

“Isn’t there a way to ask for entry?” asked Revi.

“ Nope. Says here she takes no calls unless they’re pre-cleared.”
“Aren’t you pre-cleared?”

“To call her at the Foundation, yes, because her assistant was told to put me straight through. But we didn’t plan for me calling her at home. Hell, we didn’t plan on me calling her at all—we were supposed to be running in gray mode, remember? No calls that might be traced. And I don’t have a Fedcomm code of my own because I don’t officially exist yet, so even if she wanted to pre-clear me she couldn’t. God, I hate not being a person.”

“We could contact Admiral Necheyev,” suggested Seven.

“I don’t want her involved,” said Kathryn. “Not yet. Let’s see if she thought to clear my code.” She activated the screen in the back of Lynne’s seat and punched in the codes. “Looks like she did; it’s going through.”

A few seconds later Alison’s concerned face was looking out from the screen. “Captain Janeway! I wasn’t expecting to talk to you for another day or two. I hope there’s nothing wrong.”

“Actually, we’ve had a…situation. We’re right outside your security field.”

“A situation? Is Ms. Hamilton all right?”

“We’re all fine. May we enter?”

“Of course. One moment, please.” She looked down from the screen, then back up again. “The field is down. Please come in.”

“Thank you. We’ll see you in a few minutes.” Kathryn hoped that Alison’s instant concern was born of fear for Lynne, and not disappointment that they were all unharmed. “Go ahead, Seven.”

The thick woods of Alison’s property soon gave way to a small clearing dominated by a lovely three-story home, distinctive for its small footprint.

“That’s a custom build,” said Revi. “Gorgeous. It’s actually not that big; it just looks that way at first. It’s almost an optical illusion.”

“Let’s hope Dr. Necheyev is less of an illusion than her house,” said Lynne darkly.

They landed the hovercraft near the front porch, where the light was already on. As they made their way up the path, Kathryn wished with all her might that this house would hold the answers they needed to hear. If it turned out that Alison had betrayed them, she wasn’t sure she could hold Lynne back.

She wasn’t even sure she wanted to.
Alison watched the hovercraft pass her perimeter and brought the security field back up. These were the last people she’d expected to see outside her house, and she had a feeling she wasn’t going to like the news they brought.

“Great,” she muttered, looking at her half-finished dinner. “Guess my day just got longer.”

She had time to recycle the dinner and clear a pile of unread PADDs off her couch before the door chime sounded. Hurrying back to the front door, she opened it and stood aside. “Please come in.”

“Sorry to bother you at home, Dr. Necheyev,” said Captain Janeway as she entered.

“Not at all.” Alison’s dread increased as she watched the four women crowd into her hallway. They were stone-faced and quiet, offering none of the friendliness she’d seen in them when they’d parted three days ago. She shut the door and slipped past, leading them down the hall to her living room. “Please make yourselves comfortable,” she said, indicating the couch and chairs. “Can I get you anything?”

As the other women moved into the living room, Hamilton turned on her and said, “Yes. You can get me some answers.”

“Lynne…” Janeway began.

“Not this time, Kathryn.” Hamilton’s eyes never left Alison’s. “I just spent three hours giving answers to the police. It’s my turn to ask the questions.”

Alison began to feel a little intimidated. “I don’t under—”

“Tell me this, Dr. Necheyev,” Hamilton interrupted. “How is it possible that three assassins managed to find me on a fucking empty mountain, outside the ski resort boundary where no one ever goes, when you’re the only person in the world who knew where we were?”

Alison’s mouth dropped open. “They found you?”

“How is that really a surprise to you?” Hamilton folded her arms across her chest, her expression thunderous. “Or is the surprise that I’m not dead yet?”

Looking from her to the others, Alison found only suspicion and cool watchfulness. Suddenly Hamilton seemed to be a little too close, towering
over her even though she hadn’t moved, and Alison took an involuntary step back. “Wait. You’re accusing me of giving you up?”

“I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m just asking you a question, and so far I haven’t heard an answer.” Hamilton crowded her again, and Alison felt the wall at her back.

“I can’t believe this,” she said. “I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t even tell Aunt Alynna! How can you even think it?”

“I can think it because they knew. And they got the information from someone, and you’re the only person they could have gotten it from. Do you want to try that answer again?”

“Lynne, stop. There are better ways to do this.” Janeway’s voice came from right behind Hamilton, but it didn’t seem to budge her. She stared at Alison with nothing but ice in her eyes, and for the first time Alison understood what her aunt had been talking about when she’d warned her not to underestimate this woman. Though Hamilton wasn’t touching her, and her hands hung loose at her sides, every nerve in Alison’s body was screaming danger.

Forcing her voice to remain level, she said, “You can ask me that question as many times as you want. I’m giving you the same answer. I did not tell anyone where you were, and I resent the accusation. After all I’ve done I think I deserve more consideration than that.”

“And I deserve to be able to live my life without wondering where the next shot is going to come from.” Hamilton’s voice was equally level, but on her it wasn’t reassuring at all. “Ironic to think I was safer in a hostile quadrant than I am here on Earth. At least in the Delta Quadrant I knew who to trust.”

“You can trust me. I understand why you’d suspect me, but the truth is that I’m the one who spent the last fourteen months trying to keep you safe. I’d hardly have gone through all that just to give you up now. I’m on your side.”

They stared at each other while the room seemed to hold its collective breath. Janeway watched them both but stayed out of it, and Alison didn’t take her eyes off the woman before her. She saw no change in that cold look.

“Listen. I’m the one who suspected the mousetrap. I talked Aunt Alynna into making sure all the data going to Voyager was dissected by engineers. That wasn’t her idea, it was mine. You can ask her if you don’t
believe me; you can call her from here, right now. If it weren’t for me you would have used the slipstream drive, wouldn’t you? You’d never have found the phase variance. So what possible reason could I have for working so damn hard to bring you home, just to betray you? What would I get out of it?”

“Money is usually the motivating force,” said Hamilton. “But I don’t know what it might be for you. You tell me.”

“I don’t need money. There is no force that could motivate me to help kill an innocent person. And even if there were, Aunt Alynna would drop-kick me off the top of the Foundation building if she ever thought I was going to the wrong side. You’ve met the Admiral; do you think for a moment that she’d tell you to trust me if she had any doubts about my ethics?”

“That would depend on whether she knew she should doubt your ethics.”

“For the love of God, I am not your enemy! I’m probably your best ally on this planet! I know it must look bad, but take a step back and look at the whole picture. I’ve worked on your behalf since before I even knew you. It wasn’t my job and I took some chances with the choices I made, but I wanted to bring you home. And not so that you’d be an easier target for assassins!”

Hamilton’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, it wasn’t your job? Why were you so involved, then?”

Alison was distinctly uncomfortable with the wall at her back, and offended by the obvious physical intimidation. Nor was anyone in the room rushing to her defense. For a moment she felt wildly resentful that this woman, of all the people in the world, would be so clearly threatening to her. But she had years of experience in negotiations, and had long ago learned to see past the surface of what people presented at the table. And when she set aside her own feelings and looked into the face so close to hers, she could see the crack in Hamilton’s facade. This woman desperately needed to know who she could trust. The issue wasn’t so much that there had been a betrayal, but that Alison might have been the one to commit it. That made it personal. And it made what she said in the next few minutes very important.

“I was involved because I saw your message to your parents,” she said. “I watched you tell them why you couldn’t go home. You gave up every-
thing for love. Not just your family and friends, but your life, your time, your whole world. It was like something out of a holonovel—completely unbelievable, except for the fact that it was true. I felt privileged to have gotten a glimpse of it, and I wanted a happy ending for your story. I guess I felt a little protective. Of both of you,” she added, meeting Janeway’s eyes. Janeway nodded, encouraging her to go on.

“My aunt never lost hope that you’d make it back,” she told the Captain. “Not even when the Dominion War began and vanishing ships became an all too common occurrence. So when I found out that the Foundation was changing its mission to bring Voyager home, I felt…proud. Horrified, because of the political mess it was creating, but proud that I could have some part in bringing home the ship my aunt never forgot.” She looked back at Hamilton, whose cold expression wasn’t nearly as encouraging as Janeway’s. “And I was proud to have some part in bringing you home. You’re the reason the Foundation was created. I didn’t know that kind of thing even happened in the real world. You loved Captain Janeway so much that you gave up everything for her, and your parents loved you so much that they devoted their lives to the creation of something that has lasted over three and a half centuries. Do you realize how incredible that is? I wanted a part in that story. And I saw the danger the moment I learned about your trust fund. For fourteen months I have been trying my damnedest to keep that danger away from you, and in all that time I started to feel like…well, like I knew you. I even had visions of taking you and Captain Janeway out for a celebratory drink once you got home. But in my wildest dreams I never envisioned this. Please believe me, I am the last person on Earth who would want to hurt you.”

Some of the ice left Hamilton’s eyes, but that didn’t translate into any warmth. After another long pause she finally said, “All right. Just for the sake of argument, let’s say I do believe you. Then tell me how else that information could have gotten out if it didn’t come from you?”

The tone and the question told Alison she’d gotten over the first hurdle, though she was certain there were more ahead. “I’ll be happy to brainstorm that with you. But I’d like a little space first.”

Hamilton backed off one step, and Alison breathed easier. “Thank you. Now, maybe you can start from the beginning and tell me what happened. If I’m a traitor then I probably already know, so you won’t lose anything
by telling me. And if I’m on your side then I need to know, so you’ll only gain.”

An unwilling half-smile transformed Hamilton’s face. “Nice,” she said. “I can see why you’re the CEO.”

It broke the tension, but if Alison had any illusions about having earned back Hamilton’s trust, they were shattered when she offered once again to get drinks and found the entire group trooping after her to the kitchen. They weren’t about to let her go off alone.

But the kitchen was one of her favorite rooms in the house, and having them there somehow felt easier than having them in the living room. The sense of intimidation she’d felt vanished, and she was more secure in her ability to handle the situation. She served drinks from the replicator and, seeing that none of the others were going to sit at the breakfast nook, took a seat there herself. Looking up at the four women standing in her kitchen, she said, “I’m listening.”

It was Janeway who started the story, with Seven of Nine and Sandovhar filling in. Hamilton remained silent throughout the retelling, her gaze never leaving Alison’s face.

The story made sense right up until Janeway said Hamilton had taken cover at the base of a drop-off. Alison didn’t see how that was possible, given the fact that she’d been dodging phaser fire while skiing at full speed.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “So they just let you stop and climb down a wall without taking a shot at you?”

“I didn’t stop,” said Hamilton.

“She jumped and threw off her skis with a backflip,” said Sandovhar. “When she hit the bottom she was out of their sight.”

Alison stared. “Are you insane? You could have done their job for them!”

Hamilton shook her head. “It was a calculated risk. I had enough speed going over that jump to clear just about anything. And even if it hadn’t worked, a broken bone is fixable. A phaser shot to the head isn’t. There was no way I could have kept going; I was an easy target out there.”

“Not so easy, it sounds like,” said Alison. “Go on.”

“I took cover with Lynne,” Janeway continued, “and it turned out that the Cardassians were right underneath a wind slab. So we used our phasers to undercut the cornice of snow at the top of the ridge. It dropped
onto the wind slab and knocked it loose, and the Cardassians were buried under a few kilotons of snow.”

Alison didn’t know where to start with that one. “You threw your skis off too?”

“No, I’m not that insane.”

Hamilton snorted. “No, she just came to a complete stop above me and made herself a perfect target. Then she took the jump, with no speed at all. She had a better chance of hurting herself than I did.”

Alison looked between them. “And then you started an avalanche. Just like that.”

“Lynne’s done a lot of backcountry skiing,” said Janeway. “She knows snow.”

The whole thing was just so outrageous that Alison couldn’t help but laugh. “And Cardassians hate cold. It sounds like those thugs had no idea what they were up against. Could they have picked a worse place to try that hit?”

After a pause, the kitchen was filled with chuckles. Even Hamilton cracked a smile, and suddenly the mood seemed almost friendly.

“Actually they planned it out pretty well,” she said. “They just didn’t know enough about their environment.”

“Or about you.” Alison looked at her thoughtfully. “Why did it take them three days to find you?”

“We don’t think it did,” said Janeway. “Our guess is they spent that time preparing the hit. They must have been using our resort comm-badges to track us; certainly they knew precisely where to find Lynne.”

“So you think they waited until you went to an isolated run before making the attempt?”

“No,” said Hamilton. “Kathryn and I were on some remote runs quite a few times the first two days, with nobody around. They had any number of opportunities. We think they were just studying and planning. If they had our comm-badge numbers, then they had our false names and most likely our reservation information. They knew they had plenty of time.”

“And since they’d already failed once,” added Janeway, “they were probably motivated to make sure the second attempt went off without a hitch.”

“Did the police find any bodies?”

“No,” said Janeway. “Which means that they either had an automated
beamout, or there is at least one other in their cell who transported them out.”

“Could they still be alive?”

“Doubtful,” Hamilton said. “The police found three snowshoes. That means they were knocked off, which means the Cardassians did get slammed by the avalanche before they were beamed out. That was a steep slope and a big slab. I think they were crushed.”

Alison was a little unsettled by her matter-of-fact tone. This woman had probably killed three people today, and here she was, standing in her kitchen and looking just fine with it. Certainly it was a them or her situation, but still…!

She pushed that thought down and focused on the problem at hand. “All right. I have some information that might fit into this puzzle. Aunt Alynna’s investigators found the transporter operator at Bloomington who beamed you to the Starfleet relay; turns out he passed that information on to a man who said he was a reporter. But when Starfleet checked with the news service the man was supposed to work for, they said they had no one staking out the Bloomington station. So her guess is that the Cardassians have a Human contact here, someone who could ask questions without attracting any attention.”

Seven of Nine tilted her head. “That might explain how they determined our resort commbadge numbers. Unless they were able to remotely tap into the resort computer system—which seems doubtful given the fact that the resort’s system is localized and self-contained—they could only have gotten the information by directly accessing the records.”

“And it’s difficult for a Cardassian to sneak around an Earth ski resort unnoticed,” said Janeway.

“But not for a Human,” added Sandovhar. “Interesting. Is there any way this same man might have tapped into your systems? At work, at home?”

Alison shook her head slowly, trying to remember any occasion when that information might have been available. “I don’t think so. I mean, even if my systems are compromised, I never passed on your location. I didn’t tell Aunt Alyynna when we spoke that night; I didn’t have it recorded anywhere in my personal files. It’s just not there. The only time that information was even mentioned was when you told me in my office.”

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“Well then,” said Janeway, “I think we have to consider the possibility of a microtransmitter in your office.”

Alison stared at her, shocked. “In my office?” She felt a sense of violation just thinking about it. And yet... “But it’s not really my office, is it?” she said, more to herself than them. “It’s an office at the Foundation. I’m an employee; I don’t have sole access to it.”

“Who else would?” asked Hamilton.

“My employers,” she said. “The officers of the board.”
“B'Elanna! Call for you!” Tom’s voice floated from the back of the house.

B'Elanna looked over at her father-in-law. “Can I leave the rest of these to you?”

“You sure you didn’t plan this?” he asked, looking at the pile of potatoes she’d just begun to peel.

She grinned. “No, but I’m going to take advantage of it. These are engineer’s hands, Owen. They’re not meant to be peeling anything but cable housing.” She took the towel off her shoulder and draped it on his. “There you go. With any luck I’ll be gone a long time.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll save you some.”

“Oh, please, don’t trouble yourself.” She strode out of the kitchen and down the hall to the living room, where Tom stood by the Fedcomm monitor. “Thanks for the save,” she said. “Why your father can’t replicate potatoes like the rest of us, I have no idea. Who is it?”

He stepped aside. “See for yourself.”

A very familiar face looked out at her, and B’Elanna felt her spine stiffening of its own accord. “Captain!”

“Hello, B’Elanna. Hope I didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Not at all. Actually, you saved me from peeling potatoes.”
The captain raised her eyebrows. "Admiral Paris has you peeling potatoes?"

"He says they taste better that way. No amount of explaining the concept of molecular design will sway him."

"Oh, that sounds familiar. Maybe we should get Admiral Paris and my mom together. They’d have a lot to talk about."

"I’m surprised they haven’t already discovered it."

Janeway smiled. "I don’t think the topic of potatoes normally comes up at Starfleet receptions. So how are you doing? Everything okay there? Tom says he thinks you’ve replaced his father with a particularly well-designed android."

B’Elanna glanced at her husband, who grinned and shrugged his shoulders. "Tom hasn’t quite adapted to the concept of seeing his father through adult eyes. He wasn’t one when he left, you know. But yes, everything is great! Owen has been so welcoming, and guess what—my mother is coming!"

"Really? That’s wonderful news! I thought you said she’d never leave the colony?"

"I didn’t think she would! But when she found out that I can’t go there, she decided to come here. I know, I’m amazed too. Never underestimate the power of a grandchild. But she can’t come for two weeks. She has teaching obligations, plus it’s a three-day trip over here. I wish I could see her sooner. Have you heard anything about the travel restrictions on the Maquis?"

"I wish that were why I was calling." B’Elanna’s heart sank, and Janeway held up her hand. "No, don’t worry, I haven’t heard anything bad about the Maquis situation either. So far as I know, the Federation Council hasn’t moved on that one yet. I’m calling because...well, I need to ask you a favor."

That got B’Elanna’s attention, and Tom’s too. He moved in closely behind her as she said, “Is everything all right on your end?”

Janeway paused for a moment before saying quietly, “There have been two attempts on Lynne’s life in the last four days.”

“What?” exclaimed B’Elanna and Tom together. “Is she all right?” B’Elanna demanded. Shit, she felt like an ass for not asking after Lynne the moment she’d seen the captain.

“She’s fine. And there are probably three fewer Cardassian assassins to
bother the rest of the quadrant. But there may be more out there. I think
the danger will be over in another few days, but someone hired these
bastards and I want to know who. And I think you can help us.”

“I can be at the San Diego transport station in ten minutes,” said
B’Elanna. Tom’s hand squeezed her shoulder, telling her silently that she
had his full agreement. “Just tell me what you need me to do.”

A little over an hour later, B’Elanna stepped off the transporter
platform in Denver to find Revi waiting for her. She walked right up and
hugged her, pulling back to see a surprised smile on the doctor’s face.

“Not that I mind, but what was that for?” asked Revi.

“That’s for helping to take care of Lynne. And for surviving the attack
on Voyager. I’d have been seriously pissed if you’d died.”

“Me too.” Revi grinned at her. “And you know I’ll always do whatever I
can to help Lynne and Kathryn. They’re more my family than my
family is.”

“I know what you mean.” B’Elanna shifted the gear bag on her
shoulder as they made their way out of the station. “So was Janeway
telling the truth when she said everyone’s okay? Is Lynne really
all right?”

Revi shook her head. “She’s had a rough time. The attack on Voyager
wasn’t even the worst of it; that meeting at the Foundation took a lot out
of her. But gods, B’Elanna, you should have seen her when we went
skiing. She was a different woman, I swear. We linked up a couple of
times, and even the structure of her mind was different. So much more
ordered and calm. And then it all went to hell. She’s holding it together,
but I think it’s anger driving her more than anything else.”

“Well, she’s got every right to feel it. I’m a little angry myself.”

“Join the club.”

“And you’re sure you can trust Alison Necheyev?”

Shrugging, Revi said, “That’s partially why you’re here. If you find
what we think you’ll find, then yes.”

They made their way to the underground hovercraft bay, where Revi
gestured toward a nondescript craft with a flourish. “A hot rod your
husband would love.”
“Only if he could soup up the engine,” said B’Elanna. “Where’s everyone else?”

Revi unlocked the craft and said, “This isn’t big enough for six, and neither is Alison’s. The others went with her to the Foundation. We’ll be there in about ten minutes.”

“Alison?” B’Elanna chucked her bag into the back and took the front passenger seat. “You’re on a first name basis now?”

“Well, after you accuse someone of being an accessory to murder and drink vodka in her kitchen, it’s hard to stay formal.” Revi lifted off smoothly, lined up with the overhead exit, and rose up to the transit corridor, giving B’Elanna her first view of Denver.

“You didn’t drink vodka.” B’Elanna knew better; Borg cortical implants were seriously impaired by alcohol or synthehol. “Neither did Seven or Lynne.”

“No, but Kathryn and Alison got to know each other a little better.”

B’Elanna looked sharply at Revi, whose straight face finally gave way to a smile. “Wish I could have seen that,” she said. “So who was trying to loosen up whom?”

“I think it was working both ways.”

“I’m a little surprised you all let Lynne go with her,” said B’Elanna. “If you don’t fully trust Alison yet, why risk putting those two in a hovercraft together? If Alison’s working for some other interest, you’d have put her trophy right into her hands. She could have gone anywhere.”

“With Seven and Kathryn in the craft with her? In addition to Lynne?” Revi snorted. “Not likely. Besides, she wasn’t flying it. That was the deal. Kathryn took the pilot’s seat, and Seven was ready to take Alison out at a moment’s notice if she tried anything. I think Lynne might have beaten her to it; she’s just waiting for a chance to work out some of her anger.”

They travelled in silence for a few moments while B’Elanna mulled that over. “You know,” she said at last, “if Alison really is innocent, then she’s put up with a lot of crap from all of you.”

“I know. That was the other reason for the vodka.”

They set down in front of an impressive looking building, with a wide staircase leading to its front door. Even before B’Elanna made it to the top step, Lynne came bursting out of the door and wrapped her up in a hug.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, resting her cheek against B’Elanna’s head. “It’s really good to see you.”
“It’s good to see you too, Fossil.” B’Elanna squeezed fiercely before pushing Lynne back to arm’s length and looking into her eyes. “How is it that you can get into so much trouble in eight days?”

Lynne shrugged. “Just lucky, I guess.”

“Trouble follows her like a lost puppy,” said Revi as they turned toward the building.

“And the worst thing is that I can’t even say I don’t deserve it,” said Lynne. “I do. I brought all this on my own head with that message to my parents. And everyone else’s head, too.”

B’Elanna caught Revi’s eye and saw the acknowledgement there. Lynne was pretty upset if she was going down this road again; they’d dealt with that way back when the mousetrap was first suspected in the slipstream drive design.

“I thought we’d moved on from that line of thinking,” she said. “Seven months ago. Why are you here again? Nothing has changed.”

Lynne put a hand on the door and stopped. “B’Elanna, look at this building we’re walking into. It’s got my name on it. Everything has changed.” She pushed the door open and walked in, holding it for them. And then they had no more time, because Seven and Alison and the Captain were all waiting on the other side.

After she traded hugs with her friends and a handshake with Alison, who told her to please not call her Dr. Necheyev since they were all skulking into her office together, B’Elanna shouldered her bag again and said, “Okay, let’s take care of this. The sooner we find this thing, the sooner we can start dealing in facts instead of guesses.”

“This way,” said Alison, leading them across the plush lobby.

“Did you have any problems getting the equipment?” asked Janeway quietly, as they walked behind her.

“No. It’s always nice to have a captain authorizing a direct beam-in. But it was strange being on Voyager and not seeing anyone I knew. Not only that, but it’s already crawling with Starfleet engineers—and I’m pretty sure I saw some intelligence types, too.”

“I expected that. I’m actually surprised that they gave the crew so much time to get their belongings out before they started examining all the changes molecule by molecule. You know you’re going to get a lot of questions about the Borg phasers and shielding.”
“I’ll tell them everything they want to know just as soon as they give the Maquis amnesty,” said B’Elanna.

Janeway gave her a sharp look. “Blackmailing the Federation government is not a good idea.”

“Neither is treating me like a criminal.”

“B’Elanna, legally you are a criminal. You acted in violation of a Federation treaty with Cardassia. That has to be dealt with.”

“A treaty that stopped having any meaning when Cardassia attacked the Federation!”

“Hey, I’m on your side here, remember?”

B’Elanna realized how loud her voice had gotten. “I know. Sorry, Captain. It just gets to me.”

“I understand. And I’m not your captain right now. Call me Kathryn.” She smiled. “Since we’re all skulking around together.”

Looking at her thoughtfully, B’Elanna said, “You know what? I’m not sure I can.”

Janeway laughed. “Well, give it a try.”

“Hey, B’Elanna?” Lynne put an arm around her waist. “I know a bit about how you must feel. It sucks to come home and not be able to be home.”

B’Elanna looked up at her. “Yeah. That’s pretty much it. I guess you would know how that feels.”

Conversation ceased as they entered the lift and rode up to the top floor. B’Elanna was suitably impressed with the building, but given Lynne’s mood she didn’t think it was wise to say so. Alison led them to a large desk just outside an office door and paused. “It’s right through there,” she said. “Any special instructions?”

“Just let me in and don’t say anything until I okay it.”

Alison nodded, keyed in a code and stood to one side as B’Elanna entered the most sumptuous office she’d ever seen. She barely stopped herself from whistling in awe. Would Lynne get an office like this, too?

Carefully she set down her bag, opened it and took out a device she’d replicated on Voyager, where the specs were stored. It was a modification of a Maquis design, and would jam the output of just about any transmitter in existence. Setting it on Alison’s desk and activating it, she went back to the bag for a decidedly less high-tech tool. Placing it next to the jammer, she hit the activation switch and stood back as one
of Lynne’s favorite blues artists filled the air with a very high level of sound and chest-throbbing bass. If the transmitter happened to operate on a frequency the jammer couldn’t block, this would be an adequate backup.

She looked back at the doorway to find Lynne leaning against the wall, her hand over her mouth and her eyes dancing. Walking over, she said in normal tones, “Think that’ll give them something to worry about?”

Lynne removed her hand and laughed. “I don’t know. Alison, are you into blues?”

Alison was looking at the music player in ill-disguised horror. “What in God’s name is that?”

“Some excellent music from the twentieth century, saved from oblivion by yours truly. You can thank me later for bringing this to your century.”

“Much later,” said Alison.

“Okay, here’s the deal,” said B’Elanna, handing scanners to each woman. “If there’s a transmitter here, it could be the size of a pinhead, so we’re not going to find it visually. We’ll need to track it by its energy output, which will be pretty small. These are modified to scan at the frequency strengths I think are most likely to give results. We’re going to have to go over this room centimeter by centimeter.”

Janeway took her scanner and activated it. “Then let’s get started. I’ll work over on that wall.”

B’Elanna coordinated the efforts of the other women, but when she got to Alison she found the CEO frowning over her scanner. “Something wrong?”

“I don’t think I should be doing this.”

“Come again?”

Alison looked over at Lynne, who was still standing beside her. “If I’m the one who finds it, you’ll think I carried it here in my pocket and planted it when nobody was looking. It won’t solve anything. If I stay out of this then you’ll know I couldn’t have changed anything in this office.”

“Well, you haven’t been out of our sight since we got to your house, but...you’ve got a point,” said Lynne.

“Why don’t you just wait outside, then,” B’Elanna suggested.

“Unfortunately she can’t wait alone. And I shouldn’t be the one to guard her.” Lynne walked over to Seven, tapped her on the shoulder and
spoke into her ear. Seven nodded and immediately came back to the doorway.

“"I will be your guard,"" she informed Alison.

“I'm honored,” said Alison. Her voice was smooth but the comment was sarcastic, and when she turned and walked out, B'Elanna gave Seven a meaningful look.

“Remember, Seven, innocent until proven guilty.”

“I'm aware of Federation law.” Seven strode out the door before B'Elanna could respond. Shrugging, she turned around and joined the other three.

As the music blared the women stood, crouched and sometimes laid on the floor, looking intently at their scanners. Lynne had taken Seven’s assignment at Alison’s desk and spent the first fifteen minutes under it with her long legs sticking out, creating a tripping hazard that nearly caught B'Elanna twice as she worked the wall behind. The album ended and a new one began, this time a twentieth-century rock group who were enthusiastic with their use of electric guitars. Lynne, now on the other side of Alison’s desk, looked over and gave B'Elanna a thumbs up.

The second album was halfway through when B'Elanna felt a tap on her shoulder. Turning, she found Lynne looking at her.

“Found it,” said Lynne.

B'Elanna followed her around to the side of the desk and scanned the area where Lynne was pointing, under the top edge of the right side. Sure enough, there it was. She set the scanner to pinpoint the transmission frequency and recorded the data before removing the device with a pair of forceps. Setting it carefully on the desktop, she used a microfilament to deactivate it, dropped it into a sample vial, and hit the control pad on the music player. The room was abruptly plunged into silence. Janeway and Revi turned around, their faces questioning, and Seven and Alison appeared in the doorway.

Lynne picked up the sample vial and held it to the light. “Such a small thing to cause so much trouble,” she said thoughtfully. She turned and caught Alison’s eye. “And I owe you a big apology.”

“No, you don't,” said Alison. “I understand.”

Lynne gave the vial to B'Elanna and walked to the door. “Yes, I do. Like you said, you worked your ass off to keep us safe and yet we barely gave you the benefit of the doubt.” She shook her head. “I barely gave you the
benefit of the doubt. What you said in your living room—I wanted so much to believe that. You were my only ally in the Foundation, and losing that trust…it was hard.”

“I’m still your ally. That never changed.”

“I know. I mean, I know that now. I think what I hate most about this is that it’s poisoned everything we do and everyone we talk to. I don’t want it to poison my relationship with you. God knows I need all the real friends I can get here, and you have been a real friend since before I even met you. I’m sorry, Alison. Will you accept my apology?” She held out her hand.

Alison took it immediately. “I still don’t think it’s necessary, but… thank you for offering. I accept.”

They smiled at each other, and Lynne’s posture relaxed. “Thank you. So, when you mentioned envisioning taking Kathryn and me out for a celebratory drink...is that offer still open?”

“It is,” said Alison, her smile growing.

“Then I’d like to take you up on it.”

“It’s a date. But shouldn’t you ask Kathryn before you accept for her, too?”

“No need,” said Janeway. “We come as a team.” Lynne turned around to meet her eyes, and B’Elanna saw something pass between them.

“Actually I think you all come as a team,” said Alison, her gaze including the five of them. “And I’d be delighted if you’d all join me for that celebratory drink.”

“Count me in,” said B’Elanna. Revi and Seven added their acceptance, and suddenly the atmosphere in the room seemed far lighter.

Alison entered her office for the first time, walking up to B’Elanna. “May I see it?” she asked.

“Sure.” B’Elanna gave her the vial as the women gathered around the desk.

“God, it’s tiny.” Alison held it up to the light as Lynne had, turning it this way and that. “Where was it?”

“Right here.” B’Elanna pointed to the spot. “On the underside. A perfect location to catch everything being said in your office, without being overwhelmed by other sounds like drawers being shut and PADDs being shuffled around.”

“What will you do with it now?”
“Take it back to Voyager and take it apart. The components might help us track down the source.”

“I don’t think this is a matter for us anymore,” said Janeway. “The existence of this transmitter is actually a crime committed against Alison. She needs to report it to the Denver enforcement bureau, and they need to coordinate with Starfleet and the police at Silverton.”

“Starfleet will take it over,” said Alison. “Aunt Alynna will make sure of that. Besides, the original crime took place in Starfleet’s jurisdiction. This is part of the same investigation.” She suddenly went pale and leaned against the desk.

“Are you all right?” asked Janeway.

“Yes. No. I mean—” She looked up at them. “Sorry. I think it’s just hitting me that someone has been listening to everything I’ve said and done for God only knows how long. I don’t even know what I’ve said in here.” She shook her head. “I know I’ve had some personal conversations with friends. And I called an employee in here just today to ask him about his falling productivity, and he sat right there at that table and cried because his daughter is seriously ill, and he hasn’t told anyone...and that is personal. What I do in here is personal. My output may be the intellectual property of the Foundation, but what I do, what I say, is not! God! I feel so...violated.” Her paleness had retreated under a flush of color, and her eyes fairly sparked with anger. “I want whoever planted this.”

Lynne touched her shoulder sympathetically. “Then we have something in common besides the Foundation.”
“I feel like I’m twenty years old again, crashing at a friend’s house because I can’t afford a hotel.”

Kathryn sat next to Lynne on the bed and put an arm around her shoulders. “Count your blessings. At least you get to feel like you’re just crashing at B’Elanna’s father-in-law’s place. Admiral Paris was my thesis advisor. I feel like I’m sleeping over at my professor’s house.”

Lynne looked sideways at her. “I guess that is worse.”

“A lot worse. I’m afraid to venture out for a bathroom visit. What if Admiral Paris sees me in my pajamas? Do you know what that would do to my professional image? My chances of promotion?”

“Probably improve them quite a bit, I’d guess,” said Lynne with a tiny smile.

Kathryn was glad to see it, small though it was. “You’re biased.”

“Nah. Anyone with eyes would think the same thing.” The smile grew.

“You do look cute in pajamas.”

“Thanks. Though ‘cute’ wasn’t really the look I was going for.”

“Better than your usual night wear.”

“You mean naked?”

“Mm hm. If you walked down the hall like that it would really increase your chances of promotion.”
“Yes, because Admiral Paris would die of a heart attack on the spot and there’d be an instant admiral’s position open for me.”

Lynne smiled again, but it soon faded into the look Kathryn had been trying all evening to erase from her face. Nothing else had worked, so she figured it was time to tackle it head on.

“I almost had a heart attack myself today,” she said quietly. “Seeing you dodging phaser fire is really not good for my health.”

“Yeah? Well, seeing how incredibly reckless you were wasn’t good for my health either. You scared me a lot today. Why the hell didn’t you keep going?”

“Would you have, in my place?”

Lynne met her eyes briefly, then looked away. “No. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have a right to be upset about it.”

“No. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have a right to be upset about it.”

“Of all the things that happened today, that’s the one you’re upset about?”

Picking at a loose thread on the coverlet, Lynne shook her head. “That’s just the one I’m focusing on, I guess.” She gave up on the thread and let her body fall back to the mattress with a sigh. “This really wasn’t what I envisioned when I thought about coming back to Earth. We can’t stay on Voyager because that’s where an assassin would look first. We can’t go back to your mom’s for the same reason. We can’t go anywhere else for fear of being tracked by some method we haven’t discovered yet. We’re just in total limbo until the Federation decides I really am Lynne Hamilton and gives me my identification. Did I say limbo? I meant lockdown.”

It did feel a bit like that. After consulting with both Admirals Necheyev and Paris, it had been decided that Lynne would be safest at Admiral Paris’ house in San Diego. Admiral Necheyev’s San Francisco apartment was out due to her connection with Alison, Alison’s house was even more out of the question despite her security system—after all, if the assassins could break into a starship with a full security detail, a private home would not be any safer—and even Starfleet Headquarters wasn’t an entirely safe bet when they still had one or more Human contacts running loose and working for the Cardassians. But it was unlikely that anyone would connect Lynne with Paris. In addition, though neither admiral could authorize Starfleet security on Lynne’s behalf due to her lack of legal recognition, Admiral Paris could certainly order it for himself simply by stating that he had sensitive Starfleet materials in his home and needed
extra security for them. Lynne had been darkly amused to hear that she was now ‘sensitive materials’.

Kathryn reached down to push a few strands of hair off Lynne’s forehead. Out of sheer habit her fingers began combing themselves through the thick hair, and in seconds her wife’s face was visibly more relaxed. “It’s only for a few days, sweetheart,” she said. “Maybe less.”

“I know. It doesn’t help.”

Shifting position, Kathryn propped herself on an elbow and leaned over to kiss her. “I don’t care where we are, as long as you’re here with me.”

Lynne met her eyes. “I can’t even imagine not being with you. Except when things like today happen, and then I can imagine it all too well, and it scares the holy living shit out of me. Which is when I turn into a bear.” Kathryn started to shake her head, but Lynne caught her hand and held it, intertwining their fingers. “I was so worried about you. I didn’t even have time to worry about myself; it all happened too fast, and as soon as I was out of their line of sight there you were, putting yourself up as a big target outlined in neon lights. My heart was in my throat.”

“I’m sorry I worried you.” Kathryn squeezed her hand. “But you worried me a hell of a lot more. I don’t know how they missed you when you jumped. It looked to me like you were just hanging in the air. Talk about neon lights.”

“Thank the Borg Queen.”

“What?” Kathryn’s hand went slack in her surprise. “Why?”

“The Borg assimilated a few Cardassians. Some of the training techniques of the Obsidian Order are in the Collective’s memory. They’re trained to take head shots, because no matter what the humanoid species, a head shot is always fatal. Vital organs are in different locations on different species, and some are more vulnerable than others, but every humanoid species has the same weakness. When I did that flip, my feet were where my head had been. And tucking into a ball made me a smaller target. That phaser shot was so close that I heard it sizzle. If I hadn’t flipped, that third shot would have been the one. So thank the Queen for giving me a link with Revi, and access to Cardassian killing techniques. Ironic, isn’t it?”

“And wouldn’t she just hate knowing it.”

“Yeah, she would.”
Kathryn pulled her hand free and resumed her caresses. She really didn’t want to bring this up now, but it had been a lead weight in her chest all day. “There’s something else I need to ask you about.”

“What’s that?”

“What you said in the police station. About getting tired of being my wife.” She watched the furrows appear in Lynne’s forehead.

“I don’t remember saying that.”

Kathryn sighed; she’d hoped she wouldn’t have to repeat it. “You said you were tired of being Captain Janeway’s wife and having people defer to me.”

“Oh. Oh, shit. I did say that, didn’t I?” A flash of guilt crossed her face. “That was…a poor choice of words.” She pushed up onto her elbow, bringing their faces level, and added, “I was strung out and not quite in my right mind. I didn’t mean it like that. You know how I feel about being married to you.” Her gaze was intense, and Kathryn was pretty sure they were remembering the same thing. Nor was it a memory she wanted to revisit.

“I do know, but when you say things like that, it hurts. I just…” She searched for the right words, and finished, “I don’t understand how you can be so careless with statements like that after what we’ve been through.”

“I’m sorry.” Lynne caressed her cheek and left her hand there, the slight pressure doing more for Kathryn’s peace of mind than was quite reasonable. “I know I keep doing that, and I keep telling myself I’ll do better, and then as soon as I’m pissed off or hurt I forget again. I will never get tired of being your wife. I’m just tired of not being me.”

“Because you don’t have an official identity yet?”

Lynne trailed her fingers down the length of Kathryn’s throat before resting her hand on the coverlet. “That too. But that’s just the institutional annoyance. I spent two years earning my name on Voyager. I started out as ‘that four-hundred-year-old woman’ and morphed into ‘Captain Janeway’s lover’ a few months later, and it took a damn long time before I was just Lynne. And now I’m not Lynne anymore. I’m your wife. Everyone talks to you like you’re responsible for me. I may be home, but sometimes I feel more lost now than ever. Does that make any sense?”

“It does, but you do understand that you’re not alone in this, don’t
you? I’m in limbo too. I’m not even that Captain Janeway you were
talking about.”

“Oh, yes you are. Come on, they were practically saluting you in that
police station. Just because you’re not captaining Voyager right now
doesn’t mean you’ve lost your identity.”

“And just because you’re on Earth instead of Voyager doesn’t mean
you’ve lost yours, either. You’re still Lynne—as quite a few people found
out today, including several Colorado police officers and Alison
Necheyev.”

Lynne groaned. “God. Do you think she’s truly forgiven me? I was
really in her face. And in her own house, too.”

“I think the minute you told her that Stolichnaya was your favorite
vodka back when you used to drink it, she forgave you everything.”

“It was awfully nice of her to take all of us out. I like her a lot. And it
pisses me off that she had to prove herself.” Her expression closed down
so abruptly that Kathryn was startled.

“What is it?” she asked.

“It pisses me off that I have to prove myself, too. Again.”

Kathryn looked at her frown and suddenly understood. She might be
in limbo like Lynne, but nobody was questioning her motives or her iden-
tity. She was still Captain Janeway whether or not she was on Voyager,
even to people she’d never met. Her name and rank guaranteed respect, at
the very least. But Lynne was proving herself practically every day, and to
every new person.

It had to be exhausting. Especially on top of everything else.

“It’ll get better,” she said. “And… I think I get what you were trying to
say. You’re right, this is harder on you. And I probably just stepped into
the captain role at the police station because that’s how the officers were
treating me.” And because it had felt natural and not a little welcome, but
she chose not to add that.

“Yeah. They were. But that doesn’t make what I said right. I’m sorry
I’m not getting better at this.”

“Actually you are. Or maybe we are. I remember a time not too long
ago when a comment like that would have messed us up for days.”

“True.” Lynne’s lips twitched. “That’s an awfully generous ‘we’,
though. I think the reason we’re getting better is that you don’t let me get
away with this shit anymore.”
The words instantly recalled Kathryn’s conversation with her mother, and she mentally thanked Gretchen for her insight. “No, we’re getting better because neither one of us lets the other get away with things. And because we’ve both learned a hell of a lot about how to talk to each other. You know how to explain things in a way that I can understand, and that really helps to take away the hurt.”

“Does it really? Because I hate being a bear, and I hate seeing what it can do to you.”

“Yes,” said Kathryn firmly. “It does. I’m fine, and you should give yourself a little leeway here. This wasn’t exactly a typical day.”

“It’s getting to be all too typical,” muttered Lynne.

“If there are any assassins left, they’re probably thinking the same thing. Another attempt, another complete failure. Typical.” That got her a brief smile, and she continued, “You know what? I think you’re looking at this identity issue all wrong. You should savor not being you yet.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Because once people know who you are, your name is going to be bigger than mine. I’m going to be Lynne Hamilton’s wife. And everyone will be trying to make nice to me in the hopes that I’ll put in a good word with you on their behalf. Not to mention all the people who are going to try to butter you up personally.”

“Did you just say ‘butter me up’?” Lynne chuckled. “I love hearing twentieth century idioms coming out of your mouth.”

Delighted at the chuckle, Kathryn said, “I’m infected with them. It’s to the point now where I don’t even notice I’m using them.”

“Hey! I don’t think ‘infected’ is the word choice you want. Maybe...‘enhanced’.”

Kathryn covered Lynne’s hand with her own. “I’m definitely enhanced. But not by your idioms.”

Lynne leaned in for a slow, heartfelt kiss. “Thank you,” she whispered, resting their foreheads together. “And I agree with you. I don’t really care where we are either, as long as we’re together.”

A sharp rap on the door interrupted them. “Hello!” called B’Elanna. “Are you two decent?”

“Okay, maybe I do care just a little,” said Lynne. Kathryn laughed as they both sat up.
“Come on in,” she called. B’Elanna entered, came straight over to the bed and flopped onto it next to Lynne.

“Kahless, it’s good to have you two here. I’ve been going just a little insane. Do you know what it’s like to be pregnant in a house with two men?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell us,” Lynne said. She moved a little closer to Kathryn, wrapping an arm around her, and in that moment Kathryn realized just how much she’d meant those words. It felt a bit like they were living inside a hurricane, but she could always find calm and comfort with Lynne no matter where they were. She snuggled in and listened to B’Elanna’s sarcastic commentary, a smile on her face as the sheer familiarity of it seeped into her psyche. God only knew what the next few days would bring, but right here, right now, they were okay.
Hopping exhausted the possibilities inside Admiral Paris’ house, Seven exited the back door and found her quarry sitting on a deck chair, watching the distant ocean. Lynne looked up as she came out, offering a half-smile that didn’t fool Seven one bit. “Good morning, Seven.”

“Good morning.” Seven catalogued the physical symptoms of Lynne’s night as she sat stiffly on the chair next to her. “You have not had adequate sleep.”

“You’ve been talking to Kathryn.”

“Yes. But she mentioned nothing about your sleep functions.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask, then. Do I look that bad?”

“You have visible capillaries in your sclera, dilated veins beneath your eyes, and eyelids functioning at less than optimal capacity.”

Lynne let out a small snort that was almost a laugh. “Red eyes, dark circles, and my eyes are half shut. Great. If only I drank coffee.” She raised the mug in her left hand. “I’m hoping some strong tea will do the trick.”

“We need to return to Voyager. You require regeneration.”

“No, I don’t. I just need—” Lynne stopped and shook her head. “You know, if you actually sat back in the chair you might be a lot more comfortable.”

Seven edged back, stifling a sound of surprise as her body slid on the smooth, angled wood faster than she’d expected. She came up against the
back of the chair with an audible thump, her legs stretched out in front. This was not like any chair she’d ever used before. “Clearly this was not designed to facilitate egress,” she said.

“Nope. You’re not supposed to want to get out of it. It’s an adirondack chair—designed for sitting out on the deck on hot summer days.” Lynne set her mug on the wide arm of her own chair. “With built-in drink rests. Except I think they’re supposed to be holding mint juleps or something like that.”

“Mint juleps?”

“Yeah, that didn’t make it into the Collective’s memory, did it? I wonder if anyone still drinks them anymore. They were a traditional drink in the American south, made with bourbon, mint, sugar and ice. Yum.”

“That sounds...revolting,” said Seven, who had tried bourbon exactly once at a party on Voyager. It was disgusting enough by itself; she couldn’t imagine mixing it with mint and sugar.

Lynne smiled, but it was just a ghost of her normal bright expression. “It sounds revolting, but it’s really good. Especially on a hot, muggy day. It was the official drink of the Kentucky Derby. They sold them by the thousands there.”

“So people paid for the privilege of drinking a questionable concoction while watching animals run in circles?”

“Oh yes. Actually they paid a hell of a lot for that privilege.” She raised her eyebrow. “You’re almost there. But you have to actually rest your back against the back of the chair to get the full benefit.”

Caught, Seven forced herself to relax and found that the chair was indeed far more comfortable in this position. “Interesting.”

“And perfect for a deck with an ocean view.” Lynne settled deeper into her own chair. “I am using the portable regenerator tonight, by order of your sweet and very demanding partner. But that’s not why I look like shit warmed over.”

“That’s not what I said,” protested Seven, alarmed at the misinterpretation. She would never be so insulting. At least, not to Lynne.

“No, but it’s true. And don’t tell me you’re not here because Kathryn sent you.”

“She did not ‘send’ me. Though she did indicate that you might appreciate my company.”

“I always do. But you might not appreciate mine.” Lynne turned back
to the view, and after a moment Seven followed suit. She’d seen Lynne like this before—usually after an argument with Kathryn—and knew precisely how best to handle her in such a mood. Resting her head against the back of the chair, she watched the ocean in silence, waiting for her friend to speak. It had never taken longer than nine minutes before. This morning it took six point eight.

“I watched another one of my parents’ messages last night,” Lynne said at last.

Seven looked over, but Lynne’s gaze was still on the water. “Were they well?” she asked.

“They were fine. But they’ve just entered a bad period of history. The same year I left Earth, there was a surprise attack on the United States. A month later my country was at war. A year and a half later it was in a second war, without finishing the first—that’s the period my parents are in now. And not too long after that was World War Three. I know it, they don’t, but Dad’s a smart man and he knows history and global politics. He’s already making some pretty accurate guesses.”

“Is this why you slept badly?”

“No.” Lynne took a slow sip of her tea and cupped the mug in her hands, her eyes never leaving the ocean. “I didn’t sleep because Dad said he understood why I didn’t tell them about the state of their future.”

Seven frowned. This made no sense no matter how she looked at it. “I don’t understand,” she said finally.

At last Lynne met her eyes. “My parents forgave me for not warning them.”

It pained Seven that her comprehension was so inadequate. She wanted to help but couldn’t identify the problem. “You don’t want their forgiveness?” she guessed.

“What does forgiveness imply?”

Ah, now she understood. “You did nothing wrong.”

“Kathryn says the same thing. But I feel like I did something wrong. I feel like I let them down. I mean, I already broke the Temporal Prime Directive by giving my parents investment instructions, so why did I stop there? Why not just go all the way and tell them how they should prepare for the runup to the third world war, and where they should go, and how to stay safe? I could have saved them, but I didn’t. And I think my dad is already seeing the signs.”
“But you have multiple messages on that PADD. If they only recorded
one per year, then clearly they survived.”

“That’s what I thought, too. So I checked. I viewed just the first few
seconds of the last recordings. And my dad’s not in them. He doesn’t
appear after Denver was hit. I backtracked until I found the message
where Mom looked—well, kind of like I do now. And the first thing she
said was that she that she’d been debating about whether to tell me the
truth, and I knew what it was going to be. I couldn’t watch.”

“So you don’t know if he died in the bombing of Denver or not.”

“No. And I know what you’re going to say, because I’ve already had
this discussion with Kathryn. But I’m not ready. I need to see these in
order, and I don’t want to rush through them. I’ll watch them when I
want to watch them.”

Her words were defiant, but the tone of voice didn’t match. Lynne
sounded beaten, and Seven reached out to rest a hand on her arm. “Every-
thing that happened was meant to be. You did the right thing by not
interfering.”

“But I did interfere. That’s the point. I just didn’t interfere enough.”

“That’s entirely illogical. You gave your parents foreknowledge of one
specific facet of their time, and look what happened. You’re still dealing
with the ramifications of that right now. If you’d given them even more
foreknowledge, you would very likely have changed the timeline to a far
more significant degree. Perhaps a very negative degree.”

Lynne’s eyes narrowed. “You told me after I came back from Earth that
there was no way to know if my actions had changed the timeline, or if
my parents might have done all that on their own.”

Caught, Seven hastily regrouped. “I told you that there was no way to
know for certain if your actions had changed the timeline.”

“Seven of Nine! Are you telling me you argued semantics?”

Seven didn’t know quite how to answer that, but Revi was there in her
mind, offering a suggestion. “My best friend was hurting,” she said. “The
lack of certainty meant I could find supporting arguments for multiple
viewpoints. I chose the viewpoint that would help you.”

After a pause, Lynne said, “You’re shaking my faith in you. I thought
you always told the truth no matter how undiplomatic it might be.”

“I never lied; there is no known truth in this situation. There is only
probability.”
“So which probability are you choosing now? The one that will help me?”

“The one that has the highest likelihood of being correct,” said Seven promptly. “Which also happens to be the one that can help you.”

Lynne reached for her tea and took several sips, holding the mug close to her face as she gazed out to sea. “What do you think would have happened if I’d told them?” she asked in a quiet voice. “How could that have affected the timeline?”

Seven gave the question serious consideration before answering. More than anything else, she didn’t want to make a misstep. “Your parents were wealthy and probably powerful by then,” she said. “They almost certainly had connections they wouldn’t have had otherwise. And I think we can assume they’d have wanted to prevent the war if they had any ability to do so. Do you agree?”

Lynne nodded.

“Then let’s assume they had enough power and connections by then to have an impact on the political decisions of that time. Consider what would have happened if the war had not taken place, or if it had begun later or ended earlier. The truth is that this planet could not sustain the human population of that time, nor could it sustain the environmental changes that population was making. And based on what you’ve told me, political change would have been ‘too little, too late’. Correct?”

“Correct. So you’re about to argue that World War Three was a good thing because it eliminated six hundred million people immediately, god knows how many more from radiation poisoning and starvation, and set the global industrial output back by a century.”

“No war is a good thing. But the consequences can be beneficial. And the facts of your history show that this one is the reason that Earth’s governments finally united. In both political and environmental terms, it may have saved your planet.”

Lynne looked over. “It’s your planet, too.”

Seven inclined her head but made no verbal answer, waiting for Lynne to address the real point of her statement. She didn’t have to wait long.

“It’s an interesting exercise in conjecture,” said Lynne, setting her mug back on the arm of the chair. “You’re assuming an awful lot of power on my parents’ part. What if they couldn’t have had an impact on that war? What if they were just victims of it like everyone else?”
“You know they weren’t like everyone else,” said Seven. “You’re the one who gave them the best means of staying safe. You already guaranteed their financial survival, which is more security than almost anyone on the planet had at that time. I may be postulating a probability at one end of the scale, but what you’re proposing is at the other end and far less likely.”

“I know you’re right. But what I know up here doesn’t match what I feel here.” Her hand moved from her head to her heart, ending by curling into a fist as she rested her chin on it. “Tell me something,” she said, her gaze locking onto Seven’s. “If you could go back in time and save your parents from assimilation, would you?”

Would she? Hadn’t she fantasized about that, wished for a life that could have been different for all of them?

“If my parents hadn’t been assimilated, I wouldn’t be who I am,” she said. “I can never know who I would have been in an alternative timeline. Perhaps my parents avoided assimilation only to have all of us die in an ion storm. Perhaps we ended up too far from the Alpha Quadrant after following a Borg cube into a transwarp conduit, and had to settle on a planet in the Delta Quadrant. Or perhaps we all came home, and my parents earned the respect of their peers for their research, and their data helped the Federation beat the Borg and avoid defeat at Wolf 359.”

The door opened behind them. “In which case I’d never have been assimilated either,” said Revi as she stepped out. “Steph would still be here, and we’d still be married, and if I’d ever met Seven in that timeline, we couldn’t have been more than friends.” She leaned against the deck railing and smiled at Seven. “And as appealing as part of that timeline sounds, the other part would be a loss I can’t even consider.”

Seven returned her smile. : Thank you for coming out. I’m not certain I’m handling this well. :

: You’re handling it beautifully, darling. Don’t sell yourself short. :

Turning back to Lynne, Seven added, “To answer your question, based purely on what I would want for myself and not necessarily on what would be best for others, no, I wouldn’t save them. There’s no guarantee that saving my parents from one fate wouldn’t have directed them into another equally bad one. But it is certain that I wouldn’t be who I am now. I wouldn’t know you and Kathryn, and I wouldn’t be with Revi. And I agree with Revi, it’s a loss I can’t consider.”
Lynne looked up at Revi. “How about you? What would you do?”

Revi shook her head. “You can’t play this game. You’ll just drive yourself insane. No timeline is wholly beneficial for everyone. Every single event has positive consequences for some and negative consequences for others. Would I rather not have been assimilated? Of course, if I could still have Seven in my life. But it’s not that easy, is it?”

“No, I guess not.” But Lynne didn’t sound convinced.

“Your parents lived out their lives a long time ago. Don’t tear yourself apart worrying about them. You can’t change anything.”

“Not anymore,” said Lynne bitterly.

Seven touched her friend’s arm, bringing her head around. “You did what you could and no more. You must accept that.”

“How can I? It’s all very well for you two to talk about probabilities; you’re dealing in theory. I’m dealing with reality. I did have the chance to make a difference. And I played it safe. I broke the rules right up to a point and didn’t have the guts to go all the way.”

“That’s the most illogical thing I’ve ever heard you say,” said Revi. “Didn’t you and Kathryn have one of your biggest fights over just this? Over you breaking the rules as much as you did? Haven’t you been wishing you hadn’t done even this much, because of the consequences you’re already facing? You’ve been kicking yourself—also illogically, I might add—for the danger that we’re all hiding from right now. And now you’re wishing you’d interfered even more?”

“You don’t understand,” Lynne said, not looking at either of them.

“Then help us understand,” said Seven.

Lynne sighed. “It’s all just theory for you. It was just theory for me, too, until four days ago.” She looked up. “Don’t you see? My parents aren’t dead anymore. Not to me. They’re alive in those messages. I’ve got messages I haven’t seen yet, tons of them, and as long as I still haven’t seen them then my parents still have things to say. They’re still living out their lives, and I’m watching it. They’re alive.”

Seven felt Revi’s understanding even as she heard her say, “Which makes your decision more relevant than it ever was.”

“Yes! What I did or didn’t do had a direct impact on them. Before I was just guessing about that impact. Now I’m seeing it.”

“But you haven’t seen it yet,” said Seven. “You still don’t know how your father died. You could be tearing yourself apart over nothing.”
“It does seem as if you’re borrowing trouble,” added Revi. “He was very old when Denver was bombed, wasn’t he? He might just as easily have died naturally. I think you should at least see the rest of the messages before you try to take on that kind of guilt.”

Lynne didn’t respond immediately. After a silent sip of her tea, she set the mug down with a thump and pointed a finger at Revi. “You need to go see your parents.” The finger shifted to Seven. “And you need to see your aunt. Stop delaying it. You have family, right here, right now, alive and probably wondering why you still haven’t visited. Get out of here. I can’t go anywhere, and you can’t do anything except wait with me. I love you both and I love your company, but you have things to do.”

Seven and Revi looked at each other. “Well, I was thinking about it,” said Revi rather weakly.

“Stop thinking and go do it. Even if it doesn’t work out, you have to try! Otherwise you’re throwing away something I’d give anything to have. And that would seriously piss me off.”

The door opened again and Admiral Paris stepped out. “Well, aren’t you a bunch of early risers! Didn’t you get the memo? You’re not on duty right now; you get to sleep in.” He looked around with a broad smile. “It’s a beautiful day; if you’d like to go to the beach I think we can arrange a safe way of doing it.”

“Thank you, Admiral,” said Revi. “We appreciate your hospitality. But I think Seven and I have a couple of trips to make today.”

“Oh? Where are you going, if I may ask?”

“San Francisco,” said Seven, smiling at Revi. “And Providence, Rhode Island. We have family to see.”
Though Seven had been in San Francisco twice in the past nine days, this was the first time she’d seen anything of the city other than Starfleet Headquarters. She was intrigued by the close-knit homes on the steep streets; it was a style of building unlike any she’d previously viewed.

"Some of these homes are extremely old," she observed as they walked along a sidewalk.

"They’re some of the oldest of any North American city." Revi pointed to the right and they turned the corner together. "San Francisco was one of the only major cities to escape nuclear bombardment in World War Three. San Diego wasn’t so fortunate because it had a naval base. And Los Angeles was hit because it was one of the two biggest commercial shipping centers on the west coast."

"But three hundred and fifty years later, San Francisco was the only city to be attacked during the Dominion War."

"Because now it’s where Starfleet is headquartered. So clearly the moral of the story is that you should never live in a city that houses a fleet."

Seven was curious. "You don’t wish to live here?"

"Not particularly. There aren’t a lot of good memories here."

"I disagree. You have many good memories of this city." Seven sent a few images, and Revi smiled.

"Point taken. But I bet you can’t think of too many others that don’t involve Steph and my training at Starfleet."
She was right. Revi’s memories of growing up in San Francisco were colored by her tempestuous relationship with her father, her yearning for greater love and protection from her mother, and her sense of always being different.

: I wish I’d known you then. :
Revi reached out for her hand. : Maybe, in another timeline, you did. :

They walked another eight blocks down the street before Revi led them around a corner and stopped. : Well, it’s still standing. :

Seven gazed at the small two-story home. It was nearly unchanged from Revi’s memories; she’d have recognized it anywhere. There were the same planters on the front steps, the same curtains in the windows, and the same tree hanging over the sidewalk. The only thing that was different was the color.

: I see they painted it. : Revi echoed Seven’s thoughts.
: I preferred it blue. :

Revi chuckled, but it died quickly. She stood unmoving on the sidewalk, her resolve quickly fading. : You know, this seemed like a much better idea this morning. :

Seven tugged her forward, with Revi taking very reluctant steps. : Come on. It may be better than you expect. :

: There’s a higher probability that it’ll be worse. : But Revi stopped resisting, instead putting her hand in Seven’s as they mounted the steps together. With a deep breath, she raised her Borg arm and tapped the entry pad with one of the fingers of her glove. Seven heard the chime in the house, but nothing else.

“Oh well,” said Revi brightly, “nobody’s home. Guess we’ll have to do it some other time.” She was already half-turned before Seven pulled her back and tapped the pad a second time.

“If I didn’t know that you were one of the most courageous people in the quadrant, I’d think you were a coward,” she said.

Revi’s eyes dropped. “When it comes to my father, I am.”

Seven squeezed her hand. “No, you are not. You’ve seen and done more than he can ever imagine. He has no reason and no right to judge you in any way.” She could feel Revi’s lack of confidence oozing through her mind like a noxious fluid, and sent all of her own belief in response. “But I certainly have a right to judge him,” she added darkly.

Revi met her eyes again with a slight smile, just as they both heard the
footsteps inside. A moment later the door opened, revealing a small woman with Revi’s eyes, her dark hair piled on her head in an austere bun. She gasped at the sight of her daughter, her hand going to her mouth; then she reached out with both arms and crushed Revi in a hug.

“You’re home! Oh, thank the gods you’re home!”

“Dhara?” A man’s voice floated down the hall moments before Revi’s father appeared. “Is everything all—oh.”

Revi looked up from her mother’s embrace, the smile on her face instantly dropping. “Hello, Father.”

Taller and darker skinned than either his wife or his daughter, Nishad Sandovhar had the straight bearing and stern face of a career military officer, but Seven knew that the closest he’d ever been to the military was when Revi joined Starfleet. Instead he’d ruled over his family as if they were his subordinates, a parenting strategy that had not been effective with his daughter’s strong personality and agile mind. They had clashed over and over again, and even now Seven could sense the mounting tension between them.

“Nishad, our daughter is home!” Dhara turned, one arm still around Revi, and wiped her eyes. “The gods have answered our prayers!”

“So I see.” He strode forward, but kept his hands at his sides. “The prodigal daughter has returned. Despite never seeing fit to even let her parents know she was alive.”

“Good to see you too.” Revi’s sarcasm, at least, was still operational. “I didn’t have to tell you. I knew Starfleet would notify you the moment they got the word from Voyager.”

“We were so grateful for that communiqué,” said Dhara. “For nine long years we thought you were dead. You cannot imagine the joy of knowing we were wrong; that you’d survived and were on a Starfleet ship.”

Revi smiled down at her. “I’m sorry I didn’t send a more personal message, Mother. After all that time it was difficult to know what to say.”

“How about ‘Father, Mother, I’m alive and I’m fine. Please don’t spend any more time mourning my loss.’ That would have been courteous,” said Nishad.

Revi managed not to say what was on the tip of her tongue, but Seven heard it. : So you did mourn me. I’m shocked. : Instead, she stepped aside and
indicated Seven. “I’d like to present Seven of Nine, also lately of the Borg Collective. And my fiancée.”

Seven found herself the object of scrutiny by two pairs of dark brown eyes as she held out her hand. “It’s good to meet you.”

Dhara took her hand first, squeezing it warmly. “It’s good to meet you as well. You must be a remarkable woman to have landed my daughter.”

Seven felt Revi wince; her parents had never known about her prior marriage to Steph.

“Welcome,” said Nishad gruffly. His grip was considerably stronger than his wife’s. “Well, don’t stand on the porch like a pair of salesmen. Come in.” He turned and led the way to a small living room, furnished with a plump pair of couches, glossy plants, and brightly colored rugs. Seven would have bet a month’s rations that Nishad hadn’t had anything to do with the décor.

: You’d be right about that. Father’s realm was the bar. Mother took care of the house. :

As they settled onto one of the sofas, Nishad took the other while Dhara remained standing. “May I get you a drink? Something to eat?” Her hands fluttered nervously, and Seven guessed she was taking the role of hostess at least partially out of a lack of knowing what else to do.

“No, thank you,” said Revi, who’d seen the same thing. “Mother, please sit down. We’ve got a lot to say to each other, so we might as well start now.”

Dhara sat next to her husband, her back rigid.

“First of all, I’m glad to see that you’re both all right,” Revi said. “The first thing I did when I heard about the Breen attack was check the casualty lists. Did the bar survive?”

“We had minor damage,” said Nishad. “Mostly concussive from the explosions. Fortunately, most of the attack was concentrated on Starfleet Headquarters and the Golden Gate Bridge.”

: Fortunately! : Revi was instantly disgusted at his lack of compassion for those who had died.

: He may not mean that the way it sounded. : Seven knew what it was like to say things that were taken the wrong way.

: Oh, Seven, it’s not the same as what you’ve done. Believe me, he meant it. :

“Business actually increased after that, though,” Nishad continued. “People needed to unwind more than ever. So we came out of it just fine.”
“That’s good to hear. I was worried.”
“You had a funny way of showing it.”
“Nishad,” murmured Dhara.
“No, Mother, it’s all right. I didn’t expect more than one or two minutes of polite talk. Go ahead, Father.” Revi stared at him with a challenge on her face, but Seven could feel the ball of dread inside her. Nor did her father disappoint.
“You’re one to talk about polite. I cannot believe you let Starfleet tell us you were alive. You owed us a basic courtesy and you failed at even that. You could have made up for it by inviting us to the homecoming reception, but again, all we heard was silence. I’m really not sure why you’ve come now.”
Revi took a deep breath. “I admit I was wrong in not telling you personally that I was alive, and I’ve already apologized for it. A lot happened to me in those nine years, too much to ever cover in a one-way message or a three-minute call. And because there was too much to say, I said nothing at all. I know that was a poor choice, but it was the only choice I could make at the time. As for the reception—I really didn’t want our reunion to take place in front of several hundred people. Given the treatment I’ve received so far, perhaps you can understand why.”
“Starfleet told us you were captured by the Borg,” Dhara said softly, her eyes on Revi’s optical implant. “They sent a counselor to talk to us last year, when we learned you were alive. She told us that it might be difficult for you to talk about.”
Revi laughed humorlessly. “Captured? They told you I was captured?”
“Weren’t you?”
“Mother, the term is assimilated. Borg don’t capture. They turn you into one of them. They suppress your will, your memories, your individuality—everything that makes you a person. You become nothing more than a drone, a living machine. You spend your days doing what the Borg Collective assigns you to do, no matter how horrifying it might be. No matter how much you would never have done it as an individual. There is no choice. It’s not capture. It’s not even living. It’s a walking death.”
Dhara’s eyes filled with tears in the awkward silence that followed. At last Nishad asked, “How did you escape?”
“I didn’t. Nobody escapes from the Borg. The cube I was on broke
down in an electrokinetic storm, and the neuroelectric field generator failed. Which meant that everyone on the cube suddenly remembered who they were.” The memories of that moment of awareness—and the horror that accompanied it—briefly flared through her mind, and Seven took her hand. With a grateful glance in her direction, Revi continued, “The cube was damaged so badly that it lost its link to the Borg Collective. No other ships ever came for us, so we were free. Those of us who survived the damage formed a colony on a nearby planet, and I was there for five years. That wasn’t much more than surviving, either, but at least I had my own mind back. I left after the colony reestablished the neural link tying all the ex-Borg together.”

“Do you mean...they created another collective?” asked Dhara.

“Yes.”

“Voluntarily?” Nishad was clearly shocked. When Revi nodded, he asked, “Why in the names of all the gods would anyone do that?”

“Because it was either that or death for most of the colonists. Keep in mind that the Borg assimilated all kinds of species, including those who were at war with each other. As long as their individuality was suppressed, they worked as a single community. After they regained their individuality, all of those cultural hatreds came back to the surface. People who had been working side by side started looking at each other with suspicion, and the colony quickly segregated into separate enclaves. Not long after that the skirmishes started, and then it was outright war. There was only one way to prevent the colony from self destructing. So we did it.”

“Well, I can certainly see why you were looking for the first passing ship to take you out of there. Good gods, Revi, I’m sorry you had to go through that. I understand why you didn’t want to talk about it—I can’t even imagine how terrible it must have been to have others invading your mind.” He looked at Seven. “Were you on the colony too? Is that how you met?”

“No, we met aboard Voyager. I had been freed from the Collective two years earlier by Captain Janeway.” Seven noticed that his demeanor toward Revi had eased the moment he’d realized that she had been a victim of forced mental control.

: Because it puts us on the same side of an issue. Watch what happens when he
understands that I’m still sharing my mind with you. Then we’ll be on different sides, and everything will change. : Revi glanced at her. : That’s how it works in this house. Agree with him and everything is fine. Disagree and the fireworks start. :

“How fortunate she found you, then,” he was saying. “The odds against that must have been astronomical.”

“Indeed.” Seven refrained from quoting actual probability figures. “And I can say now that it was fortunate, but I wasn’t appreciative at the time.”

: Oh, Seven. You’re not. :

: Of course I am. :

“You weren’t grateful to be rescued?” asked Dhara.

“I was assimilated at the age of six and raised by the Borg. That was the only life I ever knew. My rescue felt like capture to me, and the first months were similar to sensory deprivation torture. I was accustomed to hearing the voices of thousands; even millions in my mind. And then there was nothing but silence. It was terrifying and debilitating.”

“But what you were raised in was unnatural,” said Nishad. “Captain Janeway merely returned you to normalcy. It may have been shocking at first, but surely you’re grateful now.”

“Certainly. Though I never did adapt to the loss of the voices. I’m not comfortable being alone in my mind.”

“We’re not meant to share our minds,” he said. “Mental privacy is a gift from the gods. Those who would invade our private thoughts are an abomination. You didn’t know any better, but it’s good that you’re learning now.”

“I’ve learned a great deal, Mr. Sandovhar, but I don’t count that as part of my knowledge. Mental privacy is simply a state of being. For some it’s desirable, and for others it’s not. I myself do not prefer it.”

: Here we go. Gods, Seven, I can’t believe you’re already wading into this. :

: Do you want me to stop? : Much as she wanted to do battle with this man, she would stop if Revi asked.

: Hell no. I want to get it over with and get out of here. :

Seven squeezed her hand as Nishad responded, his tone slightly more stern. “You were a victim, and it’s clear your thinking is still poisoned by it. You’ve had barely three years to become accustomed to a normal mind after a lifetime of something very unnatural. It may simply take more time.”
“No, I had two years to adapt to a silent mind. Once Revi came aboard Voyager, I was freed from that.”

There was a long, very pregnant pause.

“What exactly do you mean, you were freed?” Nishad asked at last.

“I mean we connected. Revi is an ex-Borg, just like me. We still have many of our Borg implants, and one of them is a neural transceiver. When she came aboard, we established a neural link.”

: Thanks for not telling him that I’m the one who established it. :

Seven smiled at her. : Some things are on a need to know basis. He doesn’t need to know that. :

Revi grinned briefly, but it slid off her face as she looked past Seven. When Seven turned, she found Nishad staring at his daughter as if she’d turned into an Arcadian snake right before his eyes.

“You’re telepathic?”

“No,” said Revi. “I have a neural transceiver embedded in my brain that allows me to communicate mentally with other Borg. I can’t read anyone’s thoughts unless they have a transceiver as well.”

“But you’re reading her thoughts.” He gestured at Seven.

Revi lifted her chin. “Yes, I am. Every minute of every day.”

“I don’t understand. You left that colony to escape forced mental bondage and now you’re back in it with her?” His eyes turned hard as he glared at Seven. “You couldn’t get used to a normal mind, so you co-opted my daughter instead, is that it?”

“Father—”

“And now you’re engaged to this person? I forbid it.”

Seven felt the surge of anger from Revi. Nishad had touched one of the few things guaranteed to inflame her normally calm partner, and she had a feeling that those fireworks Revi had referenced were about to begin.

“You can’t forbid anything. I’m an adult and I’ve been on my own for a long time. And don’t even think about blaming Seven for our neural link; she can’t produce it on her own. Her transceiver doesn’t transmit unless she’s on a cube or in contact with a powered transceiver. It just so happens that mine is powered. I’m the one keeping this link open. And it’s one of the greatest pleasures of my life to be linked with such an extraordinary person.”

His face darkened. “You know it’s wrong!”
“I know no such thing! Just because you think it’s wrong doesn’t mean it is. Some of us think for ourselves, Father.”

He pointed a finger. “I raised you to know right from wrong. I knew it was a mistake to let you go into Starfleet. They’ve brainwashed you with their tolerance of telepathic species. You’ve forgotten your upbringing!”

“Oh, believe me, that’s not something I could ever forget. You did your best to make an indelible imprint. If Mother hadn’t had a dermal regenerator I’d still have the scars. Why do you think I went into medicine? I got a headstart learning how to heal my own wounds after one of your lessons with your belt!”

“Lessons that were clearly not strong enough, if this is the result! My own daughter, throwing away the gift of the gods with both hands!” His eyes narrowed as he glared at Seven. “This must be your influence. Revi knew better.”

“Hey!” Revi snapped her fingers, drawing his attention. “Stop it, right now! Leave Seven alone. She has nothing to do with this argument, because she’s not the first person I’ve had this kind of connection with. We weren’t all disconnected on that Borg colony—some of us formed a mini-collective early on. It enabled us to build things together that we couldn’t build separately. I’ve been in a neural link of one kind or another since the day I was assimilated.”

He appeared shaken as much by her vehemence as by her admission. “You’re sick,” he said, his voice trembling. “The Borg made you sick. It’s not your fault, you’re not responsible. But we need to take care of you. We’ll go to Starfleet Medical; they owe it to you, they’ll take out that transceiver. It will be—”

“Over my dead body,” said Revi clearly. “This transceiver is a gift. One of the few the Borg left me with, and I am not giving it up.”

“That’s what they made you think. You haven’t healed yet, that much is obvious. Let us help you.” He bent forward, his expression earnest, and Seven realized that he was truly distressed.

“I don’t need help. I need you to look at me without your blindfold of prejudice. Look at me! I’m happy. I haven’t been since the day of my assimilation, but I am now. I came this close to killing myself just so that I’d never have to think again, or feel, or remember what I did as a Borg. My life was a living hell. Seven changed that; my link with her changed
that. She healed me and gave me the strength to go on. What part of that could possibly be sick or unnatural?"

Dhara stared at her daughter in shock, but Nishad appeared not to have noticed Revi’s reference to suicide. “Evil often wears the robes of good, you know that,” he said. “It has to, otherwise people would recognize it and stay away. Perhaps this…this link gave you something you needed at the time, but you don’t anymore. You’re home, you’re safe, you don’t need to hold on to it.” He turned his attention to Seven. “If you helped our daughter, then we’re grateful. But if you truly want to help her now, you won’t encourage this behavior.”

Seven felt as if she were studying a new humanoid species. His belief system was utterly incomprehensible. “Mr. Sandovhar, you have no understanding of what you’re asking Revi to give up. Do you utilize your hands often?”

“Excuse me?”

“Your hands. How often do you use them in a given day? Would it be hard to live without them?”

“If you’re trying to compare the natural design of a Human body to some unnatural mental joining—”

“The link Revi and I share is as deeply embedded in the functions of our bodies as your hands are in yours. If you lost your hands today, you’d survive, but it would be a very difficult adjustment and you would never be precisely the same. Something would always be missing. If we lost our link today, we’d survive as well, but it would be debilitating for both of us. We would never be the same, and we would always miss it. This link is beneficial. It improves our lives, it has enabled us to help others—”

“Actually it’s enabled us to save the lives of others,” interrupted Revi.

“And yet there are no negative consequences at all,” Seven finished. “Not for us. I can see that you perceive them, but we don’t. Neither do any of our friends. Given that the negative consequences are limited to your perception, how could it possibly be beneficial for us to remove something that is literally a part of us?”

“Those consequences are not limited to my perception,” he said. “They are fact. Just because you’re unaware of these facts does not negate their truth.”

“They are your truth. Not ours.” As he sputtered, she continued, “There are naturally telepathic species all over the galaxy. Species that are
born telepathic and have entire cultures built around mental sharing. If telepathy is as unnatural as you say, then why does it exist in natural form throughout the galaxy?"

"Telepathy is unnatural for Humans. I don’t care about other species. They’re welcome to expose their minds to each other like mental prostitutes; that’s their business and they’ll bear the consequences. I don’t interfere with them, my only objection is when they try to interfere with me. They should stay on their planets among their own kind. They have no right to force their telepathy down the throats of others.” He pointed at her. “You’re a perfect example of what happens when those species force themselves on us. It spreads like a disease. You weren’t born this way, you were made this way. And now that you can be normal, you’re choosing not to! How can you be so blind?"

“What a coincidence,” said Seven. “I was about to ask you precisely the same question.”

He threw his hands up in the air and turned to his wife. “I knew it. Didn’t I tell you this would happen when she started hanging around with that Betazoid?” Looking back at Revi, he said, “You didn’t end that friendship like I told you to, did you?”

Revi met his gaze squarely. “No. I married her.”

His mouth dropped open. “You what?”

“You heard me. Steph and I were happily married for three years. That’s when I stopped coming home, because I knew you’d never accept her. And I wasn’t willing to drag her into a reception like the one you’re giving Seven right now.”

: But you were willing to drag me, I notice. : Seven couldn’t resist.

: Darling, check that eidetic memory of yours. You dragged me. Literally. :

“You married her.” Nishad shook his head. “The Borg didn’t make you sick, she did.”

“Oh for the gods’ sake, Father! Nobody made me sick! I had a wonderful marriage with a wonderful woman, and I’ll thank you not to soil her memory with your prejudice.”

“Her memory? So she’s dead, then.”

Revi stood up, her fury flooding Seven’s senses. “Yes, she’s dead. Try not to look so pleased. Seven, we’re through here. I don’t know why I tried.”

Seven rose, taking Revi’s hand. “You tried because they’re your fami-
ly,” she said, looking from Nishad to Dhara. “And family are supposed to love and support each other even when they have differences. But perhaps your family has never learned how to love.”

Though Nishad’s face was stony, she saw sorrow in Dhara’s eyes. She could hear Revi’s longing for her mother to say something, anything, but Dhara simply pressed her lips together and looked down at her clasped hands.

“It’s hard to love someone who’s a constant disappointment to you,” said Revi bitterly. “Isn’t it, Father?” Without waiting for an answer, she gripped Seven’s hand and walked out of the living room. “Don’t bother showing us out,” she called over her shoulder. “I know the way.”

Revi’s bravado lasted precisely as long as it took to get out the front door and around the corner. As soon as she was out of sight of the house she stopped and bent over with her hands on her thighs, the effort of holding herself together finally becoming too much. “Fucking hell,” she gasped. “That was every bit as bad as I thought it would be.”

Seven rubbed her back. “No, it wasn’t.”

Revi took a deep breath and straightened again. “How do you figure that?”

“Because you didn’t let him hurt you. Not the way he’s hurt you before.”

“Only because I have too many scars. After a while, scarred skin loses sensation.” Revi’s sarcasm was in full force, and Seven wasn’t sure if she was glad to see it or not.

“It’s not the mental scars, it’s your confidence. You’re an entirely different person now than you were the last time you saw him.” Seven caressed Revi’s cheek, then gently moved her hair off her shoulder and rested her hand there. “You’re far stronger. Stronger than he understands, and stronger than he’ll ever be.”

Revi gave her a small smile. “Thank you, darling. And thanks for defending me. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything quite so satisfying as Borg logic taking apart my father’s beliefs.”

“I would defend you against far more frightening opponents than your father, you know that.” Seven shook her head. “However, Borg logic seemed to have little effect.”

“That’s because logic requires one to actually think. Father doesn’t think, he feels and he reacts. Usually badly.”
“Revi!”

They turned at the sound of Dhara’s voice. “Mother?” Revi was stunned. “What are you doing here?”

Dhara ran up to them, slightly breathless. “I’m so sorry. So sorry. Please, don’t let this be the last time we see you. I have so many questions, so much I need to know. We lost you for over ten years and hardly saw you at all for three years before that; don’t walk away again.”

“I’m not walking back into that.” Revi pointed toward the house. “Don’t ask me to.”

“He’s just worried about you, that’s all. You have to admit that your news was rather unexpected. He’ll be better once he’s had time to get used to it.”

“No, he won’t, and you know it. Come on, Mother. He’s been like this for a lifetime; he’s not going to change. Especially when no one ever calls him on it.” Her glare left no doubt as to whom she was referring, and Seven saw the acknowledgment in Dhara’s expression.

“I know you think I should argue with him, but that’s just not my way.” She looked her daughter in the eye. “It’s yours. You have the freedom to anger him and walk away; I live with that anger.”

“You don’t have to.”

“There is more to your father than the anger. He’s a good man at heart. I wish you could see that.”

“And I wish you’d defend me to him the way you’re defending him right now!”

“What makes you think I don’t?” asked Dhara quietly.

Rocked by the very idea, Revi said, “Maybe because I’ve never heard it. Not once in my life.”

“It’s not right for me to contradict him in front of you. We’re your parents; we’re supposed to present a united front. But don’t assume that means I behave the same way when we’re alone.”

“I’m forty years old, Mother. I think we’re past the time when you and Father are supposed to be presenting a united parenting front. We’re all adults now, but you’d never know it from the way he talks to me. Would you let him talk that way to a friend of yours?”

“You’re not a friend, you’re our child.”

“So that means you can treat me with less courtesy and less affection than you’d give a friend.”
“Less affection! Do you know what we went through when we got the message from Starfleet that you were killed in action? We mourned you. We thought we’d lost our only child. We could not love you more.”

“How can you say that?” Revi’s voice was breaking. “How can you possibly say that? I don’t see any love! And I certainly don’t feel it!”

Tears sprang to Dhara’s eyes. “Is that really what you think? That we don’t love you?”

Revi couldn’t answer; it was taking all her strength to hold back her own tears. Seven wrapped an arm around her waist and sent all the strength she could, her own heart breaking in sympathy. Revi had the courage to stand up to her father, but her mother had penetrated her defenses almost without effort.

With a grateful thought sent in Seven’s direction, Revi found her voice and said hoarsely, “All my life I’ve felt alone in this family. I’ve waited for you to back me up, to take my side, to defend me just once. You never did. You watched him drag me screaming from the room and you knew he was hurting me and you never came! Never! So excuse me if I find this news that you were defending me in private just a little convenient. You had years to prove your love to me; it’s a little late now. When I was a girl I cried for it. I wanted it more than anything in the world. Even as an adult I craved it; I kept trying for it right up until I got involved with Steph. And then I knew it was hopeless. Now—” She threw up a hand in disgust. “Now I just wanted to see you again and introduce the woman I love, and all the patterns are still there. He lectures and gets angry, and you sit there silent as a tree stump. You know what, Mother? I know what love is now. That’s the wonderful thing about a neural link. I don’t have to depend on Seven saying the words. I don’t even have to interpret it from her actions. I know. And compared to what I feel from her, I can’t see anything about my life with you and Father that comes anywhere close. If you love me then it’s not any kind of love I recognize.”

Dhara covered her mouth, the tears streaming down her face. “But I do,” she whispered. “You’re my only child; how could I not?”

“Yeah, that’s what I used to think, too.”

Seven saw the words cut right through Dhara, and even though she harbored her own ill will toward the woman who had never openly defended her daughter, she couldn’t help but feel sympathetic.
“How did this happen? I don’t understand! We gave you everything you needed. We supported you, helped you, loved you—”

“Sure, as long as I did what you wanted and played the role you thought I should play. And whenever I deviated from the script, I paid for it.”

“We just wanted you to be happy! Can you accept that we could see farther ahead than you could? Parents are supposed to do what’s best for their children, and that’s not always what the child thinks is best.”

“Oh for the gods’ sake, Mother! I’m not talking about me getting upset because you wouldn’t let me play outside after dark! I’m talking about the friends he drove away, the classes he wouldn’t let me take, the books I couldn’t read. And don’t tell me it was all parental obligation to a child who didn’t know better. It never stopped. You never realized that I grew up. Even when I was living on my own he was still trying to control me, and you were still silent. You were both thrilled with my medical career right up until the moment I decided to join Starfleet, and then the arguments started, just like always. Starfleet wasn’t right for me, I could do so much more elsewhere, I was selling out my dreams—”

“And we were right!” cried Dhara. “Starfleet nearly killed you!”

“No, the Borg nearly killed me. Starfleet saved me.” Calmer now, Revi continued, “Starfleet is where I found Steph. It’s where I found meaningful work, and challenges that fired me up, and people who accepted me just as I was, instead of withholding their approval unless I twisted myself into their image of what I should be. It’s where I found Seven, and Kathryn and Lynne, and a whole ship full of people who looked past my Borg implants and actually chose me for their doctor. Starfleet has always been my salvation. It saved me from dying—and before that, it saved me from you.”

“Oh, that is not fair. You talk about twisted images; you certainly have one of us. How did we become the monsters in your life?”

“Hard work and lots of practice, I suppose.” Before Dhara could react, Revi held up her hand. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. But Mother, look at the evidence right now, right back there in that house. I just brought my fiancée to meet my parents, and within minutes Father is forbidding me to marry her and telling me I’m sick. All because he doesn’t agree with my decisions. That’s not my imagination, and it’s not anything new.”

“You just caught him by surprise...”
“Stop defending him!” Revi shouted. “Just once in your life, defend me! Just once!” The tears overflowed as she struggled to regain control, and when she spoke again her voice was almost a monotone. “Do you know what the worst part of this is? It’s exactly what I expected. He said everything I knew he’d say, and you sat there and said nothing, like I knew you’d do. Nothing has changed. I came here because I hoped I was wrong. But I wasn’t.”

Dhara’s expression had gone from shocked to despairing, and her tears matched Revi’s. “No, nothing has changed,” she said. “We still love you and you still don’t know how to see it. And you’re right about your father and I know he could have done so much better...we could have done so much better, but it’s not for lack of love.”

Revi shook her head, unable to speak.

“Gods, how can I make you understand? I wish...” Dhara stopped, bit her lip, and continued in a trembling voice. “I wish I could have that link of yours. Just for a moment, just so that you could see. There’s too much distance between us; too many years and arguments. And too much bad feeling. You set foot in our house for the first time in ten years and you’re leaving again ten minutes later, and I know you’re not coming back. If a link could cut through all that, then I swear to the gods I’d use it.”

Revi stared at her. “Do you mean that?”

“Yes. I do. I don’t share your father’s beliefs. Maybe I did at one time, but...” She shook her head. “I’ll work on him, Revi. I’ll try, I swear. Just please, don’t walk away again.”

“There’s a way, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could link with me if you really wanted to. I could put an external neural transceiver on you. It’s temporary and it has no lasting aftereffects. And it would do exactly what you say you want to do—cut through the years and the distance and show each of us how the other really feels.”

Dhara was quiet, clearly stunned by the offer.

“What do you say?” Revi’s defenses were coming back up at her mother’s continued silence. “It’s a perfect solution. Unless, of course, you didn’t mean it.”

“I...I’m surprised, that’s all. I didn’t realize it was even possible.”

“Of course you didn’t. That’s why you offered.” She waited a few
seconds longer before shaking her head. “That’s what I thought. Thanks for the kind words, Mother. I’ll treasure them. Come on, Seven.”

“Wait!”
They stopped, but Revi only turned halfway. “What?”
“Just...let me get used to the idea. Please.”
Revi hesitated, meeting Seven’s eyes.
“You have to admit that’s a big jump. I just need a little time,” Dhara added.

Seven felt Revi’s resolve sharpen even as she watched the expression on her face go hard. Dropping her hand, Revi turned the rest of the way around.

“No, I don’t think so. Sorry, but I’ve waited a lifetime for you to come into my corner, and I just can’t wait any longer. I know that’s not fair, but it’s the way it is. Two minutes ago you said you meant it, and now that you know it’s actually possible, you want more time? No. Either you really meant it, or you didn’t. It shouldn’t take you any time at all to tell me the truth.”

“Gods. You sound just like your father. Whatever you think of him, you’re more like him than you realize.”

Revi folded her arms over her chest and waited, making her mother visibly uncomfortable. At last Dhara said, “Tell me what it’s like. Would you know everything I’m thinking?”

“Everything you’re thinking at the time, yes.”
“So if I didn’t think about something, you wouldn’t...hear it.”
“No. But since you’ve never been in a link, you haven’t developed mental control. So it’s likely that you’d think about things you didn’t mean to.”

Dhara nodded slowly. “And you’d know what I was feeling?”
“Yes.”
“And I’d have the same insight into you.”
“It works both ways. I do have the ability to block my emotions from the link, but I wouldn’t in this case.”

“And you can’t...I don’t know how to say this. You can’t dig after things that I might not want to show you?”
“I could, but that would be an inexcusable invasion of privacy. One thing Father has never bothered to learn is that telepathic species almost
always have rigid cultural rules to prevent unwanted sharing. The ex-Borg in my colony lived by the same rules.”

“Those rules may exist, but how are they enforced? How would a normal person know if a telepath is breaking the rules?”

Revi rolled her eyes. “Now you’re quoting Father. You know the same way that I knew Steph would never violate my mental privacy. It’s called trust. I trusted Steph long before I married her, and even more afterward. And I can tell where you’re going with these questions, so I guess the real issue here is whether or not you trust me. That one I can’t answer.”

Dhara didn’t deny it. “Tell me something,” she said. “Would you make this same offer to your father?”

The question caught Revi entirely off guard. “He’d never even consider it.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I know what you asked.” By now Revi had regrouped. “No, I wouldn’t make him the offer. Because I don’t want him in my mind.”

Dhara nodded, as if Revi had confirmed something for her. “Then I’m honored you made the offer to me. You may think I’m a monster, but you still trust me enough to share yourself.”

“I don’t think you’re a monster, Mother.”

“No? Then prove it. We’ll make that link and you can show me.”

Revi stared. “Is that your decision?”

“Yes. If only to defy this image you seem to have of me. Of us.”

Still shocked, Revi asked, “What will you tell Father?”

“You have no idea how many things I don’t tell him. This will just be one more.”

And now the decision was in Revi’s hands. She hadn’t expected her mother to say yes; hadn’t even examined her own feelings about linking.

: I don’t really have a choice, do I? : she asked Seven.
: Of course you do. :
: No. I don’t. If I don’t do this, I’ll never know. :
: If she reneges and breaks your heart, you’ll never know anyway. :
: But at least I’ll know that I wasn’t a coward. : Aloud, Revi said, “All right, I accept your offer. And if you break it, if you back out of this, then you’ll never see me again. That’s not a threat. It’s just a fact. I simply cannot do this any longer; I need peace in my life. So I hope you’re sincere.”

“I am.”
Revi nodded. “Okay. When?”

“Whatever you want. Where will we go?”

“We can do it anywhere, I just need to get the transceiver off Voyager. And I think you need a little more time to consider it. I’m going to be out of contact for a few days, but after that you can call Starfleet and they’ll forward it. Can you meet me a week from now?”

“I can meet you any time.”

“Then call me in seven days and I’ll tell you where to find me.”

Dhara nodded, her lips pressed together. She held out her arms, and after a moment’s hesitation Revi stepped into them. Clinging to her daughter, Dhara whispered, “Thank you for coming.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Revi pulled away. “You’d better get back. He’ll be wondering what’s keeping you.”

“He knows I’m talking to you. I already gave him a piece of my mind for driving you out of the house.” She caressed Revi’s face, carefully avoiding the implant. “Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore.”

“Good.” She squeezed Revi’s shoulder and turned to Seven. “It was a pleasure to meet you. I’m sorry our first meeting wasn’t more…congenial.”

“I’ve experienced far worse,” said Seven truthfully, and Revi shook her head.

“Seven, could you be less diplomatic?”

“Yes,” said Seven, wondering why Revi still asked rhetorical questions.

Dhara smiled. “I think you’ll give my daughter a run for her money. I look forward to getting to know you better.”

“As do I,” said Seven politely.

“I guess I should let you go, then.” Reluctantly, she took a step back. “Revi?”

“What?”

“I forgot one thing. Will this link include memories?”

“If you want it to. It’s up to you. You decide what you want to share.”

“Then you should prepare yourself. You might just find out that your father loves you after all.” When Revi gave no response, she nodded and said, “Until next week, then. Goodbye.” She turned and walked back up the sidewalk, giving a final wave just before vanishing from their sight.
“Holy fucking gods above,” breathed Revi as she stared after her. “I cannot believe she’s actually going to do it.”
“I think you’re almost afraid she will,” said Seven.
“I am.” Revi met her eyes. “I’m afraid of what she might show me. But I have to know.”
“I know.”
They turned down the sidewalk and resumed their path toward the transport center. “So,” said Revi, “shall we go see your aunt now, or should we go to Voyager and take a heavy dose of narcotics first?”
In contrast to Revi, who had intentionally not given her parents any advance warning of their visit, Seven had contacted Irene Hansen before they’d left San Francisco. Her aunt had been delighted to hear from her and even happier when she learned of Seven’s desire for a visit. Not only were they expected, they were enthusiastically invited—which didn’t help Seven’s discomfort at all. Being the object of such open anticipation made her apprehensive, and that feeling escalated into outright alarm when Irene opened her front door, took one look at Seven, and burst into tears.

“Oh, lord, I promised myself I wouldn’t cry,” she said, waving her hand in front of her face. “I’m sorry. Please—come in.” She stood aside, sniffing, as Seven and Revi walked past her and stood in the small entryway. Irene closed the door behind them, looked up at Seven, and let out another sob.

“Perhaps we should come at another time,” said Seven, who would have been only too glad to bolt back out the door.

“No!” Irene exclaimed. “No no no.” She wiped her cheeks with both hands and took a deep breath. “It’s just that...it’s wonderful to see you again. My stars, look at you.” Her eyes welled up again and she stepped into Seven, who awkwardly put her arms around the shorter woman. The embrace lasted only four point six seconds, to Seven’s profound relief.
Hugging someone she didn’t know felt very different from hugging Revi or her friends.

: I think she senses that, Seven. This is awkward for her, too. And don’t even think about bolting. You wouldn’t let me run away, so I’m not letting you. :

Seven shot her a brief glare just before Irene stepped back again. She smiled, rubbing Seven’s side, then turned to hold out a hand. “And you must be Revi. It’s so good to meet you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Hansen,” said Revi as they shook hands. “I’m pleased to be here.”

Irene made a dismissive motion. “Your parents raised you right, I see, but I’m not Ms. Hansen and I haven’t been since I retired from teaching. So you call me Irene.”

“Yes ma’am,” said Revi with a big smile. : I like her already! And I can see where you got some of your attitude. :

: I have no idea what attitude you’re referring to. : But Revi’s ease with Irene was already helping to relax Seven, and she looked at her aunt with more curiosity and less resistance.

“I’m not ma’am either!” Irene was saying, her blue eyes already clearing from her earlier tears. “Just Irene, thank you. Come on into the kitchen,” she added, leading them down a short hall. “Normally I receive guests in the living room, but you’re family.”

They stepped into a large, sunny kitchen dotted with house plants, and Irene waved them toward the round wooden table by the immense window looking onto her garden. “Sit, sit. What would you like to drink? I have all sorts of teas—I prefer making it the old fashioned way—and hot chocolate, but if you don’t mind a cold drink when it’s close to freezing outside then I could offer you beer or juice or water…oh, and wine. Would you like wine?”

“I would enjoy a hot chocolate,” said Seven, carefully seating herself at the table. It was quite a bit colder in Rhode Island than it had been in San Francisco. Irene’s garden had patches of snow in the shady spots.

“What sort of teas do you have?” asked Revi.

“Oh, let’s see.” Irene opened a cupboard and looked up at an astonishing array of small stasis containers. “Earl Grey, Bolian, lavender, Andorian mint, rooibos, chamomile, English breakfast, Scottish breakfast, lemon, Vulcan—”

“Rooibos?” interrupted Revi.
“Made from the African red bush. It’s a lovely tea. I usually mix it with vanilla to add a little bit of sweetness.”

“I’ve never had it. It sounds good.”

“It is good,” said Irene, pulling down stasis containers. “I’d share it with you, but I’m feeling the need for something more robust today. So Scottish breakfast for me, and my best and most special cocoa powder for my long lost niece.” She paused with her back to them, then lifted her head again and began bustling about the counter and replicator. “Computer, one liter of tea water and three hundred and fifty milliliters of steamed milk.” As the containers appeared in the replicator, she pulled down two small teapots and one large mug, measuring complicated mixtures of powders and leaves. Seven watched in fascination, wondering if she was seeing an older, female version of her father. How similar had Magnus Hansen been to his elder sister? Did he have the same energy, the same straight spine and quick movements? If he’d lived out his life normally, would his hair have had as much silver as hers did? Would he have acquired the same lines around the corners of his eyes?

“Here you go,” said Irene, interrupting her train of thought. She brought over a steaming mug and a small plate, setting both in front of Seven. “Careful, it’s quite hot.”

Seven held back her initial response—of course it was hot, her optical implant told her the precise temperature—out of a sudden realization that perhaps referring to her Borg implants wasn’t the best way to begin their conversation. Revi confirmed it, silently applauding her restraint as Irene made another trip to the counter and returned with two more small plates and one larger one, stacked with small round pastries.

“What are these?” asked Seven curiously.

“English scones. You don’t remember having scones?”

“No.”

“I’ve never had them,” added Revi.

“Oh, my lord. I can understand why you wouldn’t remember, Annika, but Revi, weren’t you raised here on Earth?” Irene headed back to the counter.

“Yes, but my parents tended to stick with foods from the subcontinent. Can we help you carry something?” Revi asked as they watched Irene pulling more items out of the replicator.
“No, you sit right there. I’ll be done in a minute.” She brought over a tray with three small pots nestled inside, each with a utensil handle poking out the top, and set it next to the plate of scones. “Now, these are for the scones. This is butter, clotted cream, and strawberry jam,” she said, indicating each pot in turn. “You cut the scone in half and slather on whatever you want.” As she handed them knives and napkins, she added, “Personally I love to put on cream and then jam, but that’s because I’m a slave to rich foods. You should try them all.” She headed back toward the counter as Seven and Revi eyed each other in amazement.

: I wonder what would happen if we put Gretchen Janeway and your aunt in the same kitchen together. :

Seven smiled at the thought, then sampled her hot chocolate and closed her eyes in sheer pleasure. “This is unlike any hot chocolate I had on Voyager.”

“Better, I assume?” Irene returned with two teacups in saucers, setting one in front of Revi and the other at her own place, across from Seven.

“Far better,” Seven assured her. “Excellent.”

“Good. If I can’t beat replicator hot chocolate than I don’t deserve to hold up my head in public. Okay, last trip. I just need to bring the pots over. Don’t wait for me, go on, take some scones!” Off she went again.

Shaking her head, Revi reached over and selected the topmost scone on the pile. Seven followed suit, carefully raising it for a sniff. “I know this scent,” she said slowly, trying to place it. It wasn’t in her Collective memory...had she encountered this on Voyager?

“Of course you do,” said Irene, setting the two pots on the table and finally taking her own seat. “It’s lavender. Your mother’s favorite scent.”

Seven stared at her, realizing for the first time that Irene had known both of her parents.

: But you already knew that. :

: I did. But knowing and understanding are not the same thing. :

: Now that is for damned sure. : Revi poured tea into her cup, making a small sound of satisfaction over the fragrant steam that rose up, then picked up her knife and sliced her scone in half. “They look delicious. So, clotted cream and then jam?” She reached for the small blunt knife in the cream pot.

“Well, that’s my favorite. But Magnus preferred butter and Erin liked
just the jam. You inherited your love of strawberries from her,” Irene said, nodding toward Seven. “I could always motivate you with a promise of strawberries in one form or another.”

“Did you and I...spend much time together?” asked Seven. It had been some time since she’d felt this socially awkward.

“Not as much as I wanted. Your parents were on the Tendara colony, so I only saw you when they came to visit or when they had business with the Federation that couldn’t be resolved anywhere but on Earth. I did babysit you a few times, though. They left you with me for an entire weekend once.” Irene smiled as she slathered cream on her own scone. “You were so angry at being left behind that you locked yourself in my guest room and refused to come out.”

Revi laughed. “Nice to know you were stubborn and strong-willed even as a child. Not that I had any doubt.”

“I’m sorry,” said Seven automatically. “That must have been...inconvenient for you.”

“Annika, you were a child. You were inconvenient by definition. Don’t worry, I coaxed you out. With a strawberry tart.” Irene bit into her scone and rolled her eyes. “Oh, this is good. I don’t let myself have these too often. But today is special.”

Seven and Revi tried theirs as well, and quickly understood the attraction. Seven immediately ascertained that hers required additional jam, and saw Irene smile knowingly as she dipped the little spoon back in the pot.

“Some things haven’t changed, I see. That does my heart good.”

“I have no way of knowing what has and what hasn’t changed,” said Seven. “It occurs to me that you’re the only person who does.”

Irene stopped chewing, then swallowed and took a hasty sip of her tea. “I suppose that’s true. And I’ve been trying very hard not to be angry about that fact.”

“That makes you part of a big club,” said Revi. “There are quite a few of us who have reason to hate the Borg.”

“I don’t hate the Borg. They only did what they do—what both Magnus and Erin knew they’d do. No, I’m angry with my brother and Erin. They may have had the right to risk their own lives, but they didn’t have the right to risk yours.” She leveled a steady gaze on Seven. “And frankly I don’t even agree that they had the right to risk their own lives. Before they had you, yes, but not after. They had a responsibility to you.
They were parents, and that’s supposed to come before anything else. But they put their research first. Magnus was stubborn as hell and Erin wasn’t a whole lot better. Those two were made for each other. Unfortunately, that didn’t end up being a positive thing for any of us.”

Seven looked into eyes the same color as her own and recognized the expression in them. “I admit to harboring some anger myself,” she said. Unexpectedly, she began to feel as if Irene were an ally. Not a friend, and certainly not family yet, but more than a stranger.

“I bet you do. And you have every right to it.” Irene sipped her tea again. “But it doesn’t do us much good, does it? We can’t change what happened. You lost your parents and your childhood, and I lost my brother, my sister-in-law and my niece. Except I didn’t lose you after all. And that’s what I’m focusing on. It feels like a miracle that you’re here in my kitchen now, and that you still love strawberries. And I can see so much of both your parents in you, so in a way I didn’t lose them either.”

“I did,” said Seven. “I wish that I could see my father in you. But I don’t remember very much at all.”

“If I may ask—what do you remember?”

Seven recounted the scattered memories of her short childhood, feeling more at ease as Irene nodded and commented through the telling. “And then the Borg came,” she concluded. “I never saw my mother again. I did see my father once more, but—” She hesitated, out of consideration for Irene. “He was a drone,” she said simply.

“Were you, when you saw him?”

“No.”

“That must have been very difficult,” Irene said sympathetically. “So you knew him, but he didn’t know you.”

“No, he didn’t. How did you know that? Is Borg anthropology a common topic on Earth now?”

“Not based on what we saw with my parents,” said Revi. “All they knew was what the Starfleet counselor told them.”

“I’m a teacher. I like to know things. Magnus wasn’t the only one in the family with a sense of curiosity.” Irene picked up another scone and began cutting it. “And my only niece was raised by the Borg, so of course I did all the research I could on them. I wanted to understand what you’d been through.”
Revi looked at Seven, then back at Irene. “Could you be my aunt too?” she asked plaintively.

Irene smiled at her. “As long as you’re good to my niece.”

“It’s a deal.”

Seven looked between them, surprised by the ease Revi felt with Irene. Her partner was usually far more reserved with people she didn’t know.

: Yes, but Irene’s the kind of person who makes you forget you don’t really know her. Damn, I’m envious, Seven. Your family is better than mine. :

: That’s not a difficult goal to surpass. :

Revi chuckled, and Irene looked at her curiously. Seven quickly distracted her by asking about her parents, and spent the next hour learning things about them and her own childhood that she’d never suspected. Revi thoroughly enjoyed Irene’s commentary, especially the parts that pertained to parental characteristics that she said were obviously present in Seven as well. She had a fine time teasing Seven through their link, and between Revi’s high spirits and Irene’s straightforward, matter-of-fact personality, Seven felt more relaxed than she would have dreamed possible.

All of that came to a screeching halt, however, when Irene looked her in the eye and said, “Are you leaving me out of part of this conversation?”

“I don’t understand,” said Seven in confusion. Had she done something wrong?

Irene gestured at the two of them. “Are you still in mental contact?”

Seven looked helplessly at Revi. After their morning encounter with Nishad, she was reluctant to risk this nascent family connection on a potentially divisive topic.

“We’re not in contact with the Collective,” answered Revi for her.

“Well, no, I didn’t think you were. That wasn’t what I was asking. Are you in contact with each other?” She looked between them, waiting for an answer. Her expression did not look promising, and Seven mentally shrugged in resignation. If she were to lose family for the same reason as Revi, then she might as well know now as later.

“Yes, we are,” she said. “Is that a problem for you?”

“When you leave me out of it, yes. That’s like whispering in front of me, or speaking in a foreign language so that I can’t understand. You’re not obvious about it, but I can see you looking at each other and reacting to things that don’t match what we’re saying. It makes me feel left out.”
Revi gaped at her. “Wait. Your objection to our connection is that we’re excluding you?”

Irene nodded. “I’ve waited a long time to see my niece again. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to be involved in the whole conversation.”

To her obvious surprise, Revi threw her head back and laughed. Confused, Irene looked at Seven, who explained, “She’s not laughing at you.”

“No,” Revi said with a last little snort. “Gods, not at you. I’m laughing because I really want you to be my aunt now! I’d have given my right arm to have my parents actually scold me for leaving them out of a telepathic conversation, instead of telling me I’m sick in the head for having one.”

“Your parents told you you were sick in the head?” Irene’s astonishment was clear on her face. “When?”

“This morning.” Revi wasn’t laughing anymore. “They were our first stop. The family reunion lasted all of ten minutes.”

“Oh, Revi, I’m sorry.” Irene reached across the table and patted her hand. “I don’t know you well, but from what I’ve seen you’re a lovely person. And you’re obviously strong and courageous like Annika, or you wouldn’t have survived. If your parents can’t see that, they’re either willfully blind or—forgive me—desperately ignorant.”

“Forgive you for speaking the truth?” Revi shook her head. “I think both characterizations might be accurate. Though to be fair, my mother doesn’t seem to share my father’s beliefs. At least, that’s what she said today. I’m not sure I believe it yet.”

“Well, for your sake, I hope she’s telling you the truth.”

“Yeah,” said Revi with a sigh. “Me too.”

They sat in a silence which was interrupted when Irene rose, teapot in hand. “I’m ready for a refill. Anyone else?”

Revi stood as well. “Yes, but this time you don’t get to carry everything. It makes me feel left out.”

Now it was Irene’s turn to laugh. “Touché! I think maybe I will adopt you.”

Revi looked back at Seven, an enormous smile on her face. “I’m so glad we came.”

Picking up her mug, Seven followed them to the replicator. “Me too,” she said, realizing the truth of it even as she spoke. She had family—true
family, as defined by genetic heritage—and it hadn’t turned out anything like what she’d feared.

Revi clasped her hand for a moment. : Lucky you. :

: No. : Seven looked straight at Irene as she sent the thought to Revi. :

Lucky us. : 
The Starfleet security guards drew up into a stiff posture, eyes straight ahead as they stood on either side of the door. As one of them spoke quietly into his commbadge, the other said, “If you’ll wait just a moment, sir.”

“Very well.”

In fact it was little more than a moment before the door opened to reveal Admiral Paris. “Commander Tuvok, it’s good to see you,” he said with a smile. “Please, come in.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” Tuvok followed him into the spacious hallway. “I’m afraid I have little in the way of a progress report as yet.”

“I know that. You’ve only been on the job one day; even I don’t expect miracles that quickly. Besides, I’m not the one who issued the order for you to report here.”

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. “Then may I ask to whom I am reporting?”

“That would be me,” said a familiar voice behind him. He turned as the other eyebrow joined the first.

“Captain Janeway. I was not informed of your presence here.”

“We’re staying out of the communication channels,” she said, coming up beside him. “Thank you for coming, Tuvok. I really appreciate it, and I assure you that I didn’t request your involvement lightly. I hope T’Pel will forgive me for calling you away so quickly.”
“There is nothing for T’Pel to forgive. She approves of my involve-
ment. Her sense of justice, and mine, have both been offended by this
situation. Until we can all return home, none of us are home.”

She smiled. “I’m not sure that’s entirely logical, but I’ll take it and be
grateful for it.”

Had it been anyone else, he would have said that gratitude was unnec-
essary, but this was Kathryn Janeway. He’d known her long enough by
now to know that such a statement was useless. Instead, he asked, “May I
assume that Ms. Hamilton is also here?”

“Yes, she is. And she’s going to be thrilled to see you. Perhaps you’d
like to speak with her before telling us all what you’ve learned so far?”

Though her face was guileless, he detected an undercurrent. “Is there
any particular reason you wish me to speak with her beforehand?”

“Do you need one, besides the fact that she hasn’t seen you in a week
and a half and she misses you?”

He concealed a sigh. Answering a question with a question was a
Janeway trick of avoidance, but the truth was that he was also looking
forward to seeing his student and friend. “Where might I find her?”

She smiled. “This way.”

Admiral Paris nodded his consent, and Tuvok followed his captain
through several corridors to the back of the house. She stopped at a door
with a transparent upper half, looking out onto a wooden deck and a view
of the ocean. “There,” she said, indicating the figure at the far edge of the
deck. “And Tuvok? She could use a dose of your logic. At the moment,
mine’s not working.”

He turned to regard her. “Have I been recalled for my investigative
skills, or my friendship with Ms. Hamilton?”

“I requested you for your investigative skills, because I trust you more
than anyone at Starfleet Headquarters. We need to get this resolved—
quickly.” She sighed. “But I can’t deny I was also hoping you might be
able to help her personally as well. She’s always held you in a special
regard, and she hears things from you that she won’t hear from anyone
else.”

“And what is it that you believe she needs to hear from me?”

Janeway looked back through the window at her wife. “The same thing
she always needs to hear: that her best is good enough. But I think the
details ought to come from her.” Turning back toward him, she touched
his arm and smiled. “Thank you so much for coming. We’ve missed your presence since the moment you left.” Patting his arm once more, she walked back down the corridor.

As he watched her go, he reflected that one of the things he most appreciated in Kathryn Janeway was her ability to modify Human social expectations. Other Humans would wait for him to say ‘you’re welcome,’ or expect some reciprocal if insincere comment regarding how he had also missed their presence. Janeway expected none of those things, nor did she wait for them. She simply stated her own feelings, and left him to absorb the information.

Turning back to the window, he resumed his observation of Ms. Hamilton, checking her form with a critical eye. She was working through the Hundred Forms of the Savdaa, and he felt a swelling of satisfaction in noting that her movements were excellent and her concentration absolute. For fifteen minutes he stood there, unwilling to interrupt, until she finished the last form. She brought her arms down to her sides, then drew her hands in to her chest and bowed shortly over them. He could see the slight movement of her shoulders as she released the final breath. At last she turned to pick up her jacket, and their eyes met through the door. The initial surprise on her face was followed by an enormous smile as he activated the door and stepped through.

“You told me a teacher never stopped teaching, but I didn’t realize you meant it to this degree!” she said, pulling on her jacket and walking toward him. “So did it look all right?”

“I only saw the last forty-two forms,” he answered. “But what I saw looked nearly perfect.”

“Just ‘nearly’? Damn. I need to practice more.”

“I do not believe you do. Perfection is a goal that, once achieved—”

“Leaves nothing for the achiever,” she finished, her smile growing even larger. “Tuvok, it’s so good to see you! But what the hell are you doing here? Why aren’t you home on Vulcan?”

“I’m working on an investigation.”

“What?! Starfleet recalled you? That’s ridiculous! For god’s sake, you just got home! No offense, but surely they have other investigators who can do the job.”

“No doubt they do. In this case, however, I was specifically requested.”
“And what’s so all impor—” She paused. “Wait a minute. Do I detect the hand of one Kathryn Janeway?”

“I have no way of knowing what you detect,” he said.

“You came here for me.” It was not a question, and her expression did not bode well for the captain.

“I came because my friends require my assistance. And I am pleased to provide it.”

“Well, that’s just great. It’s bad enough that Revi almost died and Seven had the life scared out of her—now you’re being dragged into it, too. Tuvok, I’m sorry. You shouldn’t be here. You should be home with T’Pel and your children. And this is really pissing me off.”

“Clearly some part of your Savdaa was incorrectly performed,” he said. “The Hundred Forms unify mind and body on a common plane of balance and calm. You are neither.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a little difficult to be balanced and calm when my friends are having to pay for my choices. And my family, too. I’ve had it up to here with the whole thing, and Kathryn calling you in is not helping. You shouldn’t be involved in this.”

“I see. So my presence is neither required nor welcome. In that case I will return to Vulcan.”

That stopped her short, the angry energy visibly draining from her. “That’s not what I meant. Shit. I’m sorry, Tuvok, you came all this way and I’m being an ungrateful…never mind. I’m glad you’re here, really. It’s just…it’s been a tough week.”

“Extraordinarily so,” he agreed. “I’ve been brought up to date by Admiral Necheyev and her staff. Perhaps you might fill in anything I’m currently missing.”

After a moment, she indicated one of the oddly shaped chairs on the deck. “Sure. Have a seat. You’ll probably never be able to get out of it again, but that seems to be the general metaphor these days anyway.”

The design of the chair exceeded even the worst he had previously seen, but he managed to find a position that enabled him to remain upright and attentive, if not at ease. By contrast, she allowed herself to slide to the deepest point of the chair, coming to a stop against its back with an audible thump. Seeing him watching her, she explained, “It’s the only way to be comfortable in these. You have to just let yourself go and slide in.”
"I prefer this."

"You look like you're afraid it might bite. You know, this morning I even got Seven to sit properly in that chair. Apparently comfort was relevant after all."

"Was pride?"

That made her laugh, which—though not his primary goal—certainly eased the tension she had been displaying. "Good point," she said. "It is a little hard to get out of these things with any grace. Okay, what do you need to know?"

"Every detail, even those you may not think are important. Start from the moment you set foot on Voyager again, five days ago. What did you notice, who did you see, what exactly happened?"

She rested her head on the back of the chair, her eyes on the ocean. "Let's see. We beamed aboard Voyager via a direct Starfleet relay from the Bloomington transport station..."

As it turned out, there were quite a few details he hadn't been told during his briefing with Admiral Necheyev and her staff. Whether any of them would prove fruitful, he didn't know. But though he now had more leads to follow, the strongest one had not changed. He was convinced that if he could trace the original purchase point of the microtransmitter found in Alison Necheyev's office, he would quickly have a suspect in hand.

In the meantime, he had another puzzle before him. The story Ms. Hamilton had told explained her anger, but not the comment Captain Janeway had made.

"I'm curious about one thing," he said.

"Just one?"

Ignoring the comment, he continued, "You spoke of your family paying the price for your decisions. Unless you consider Commander Sandovhar and Seven of Nine your family, I fail to see what price you're referring to. Captain Janeway was not harmed; neither were any members of the Janeway family."

"Ah. Well, that doesn't really have anything to do with your investigation."

"Then perhaps it has something to do with our friendship."

"You know, I'm definitely starting to smell a conspiracy here," she said, but her tone held no rancor.

"Shall I investigate that as well?"
That earned him a small smile and a shake of the head. “No. I can’t blame Kathryn for worrying about me. And she’s tried to talk to me about it, but there isn’t anything to say that hasn’t already been said. I just need to get myself over this. Or maybe I just need to get over myself.” She pushed herself out of the chair, an act that clearly required considerable effort, and walked across the deck to lean against the railing. Glad for the excuse to move, he rose and joined her, waiting quietly for her to speak.

“Did Kathryn tell you about the messages from my parents?”

“She did not.”

She nodded. “Well, it turns out that my parents not only didn’t destroy that PADD I left behind, they figured out how it worked and used it to leave messages for me. One every year, on the anniversary of the day they first saw mine. So all of a sudden, I have parents again. I thought I’d closed that door a year and a half ago, but now it’s open. There are things my parents have to say that I still haven’t heard.”

“You haven’t viewed all of the messages.”

“No. They’re all I have left. Once I’ve seen them all, that door closes again. Does that make sense?”

“Of course.”

She met his eyes. “It does?”

“Yes. For the period of time that you have unviewed messages, you’re still sharing your parents’ timeline. There is still a future, as defined by temporal mechanics. As long as you’re unaware of upcoming events, decisions, conversations—any aspect of an unlived timeline—then you are, in a sense, contemporary with them.”

“God. You make it sound so perfectly logical. I thought I was just being desperate.”

“Not at all. May I assume, then, that your parents’ messages have revealed some unforeseen consequence of your intervention?”

“No. Well, not yet, at least. No, the problem is that there might be a consequence that I did foresee. But I didn’t do anything about it.”

‘Might be?’

“Don’t start,” she said. “I’ve already gotten that from Kathryn, Seven and Revi. I’m not going to watch all the messages just to rule it out.”

He acknowledged this with a nod. “Then what is this consequence that you foresaw and now fear?”

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She turned away, her eyes on the ocean. “I think my dad might have died in the bombing of Denver.”

“An event you could have warned him about,” he said. Now the pieces were falling into place.

“But didn’t,” she agreed. “And now I’m wondering why, if I were going to break the Temporal Prime Directive, I didn’t just go all the way and do it up right. Tell them everything. Keep them safe.”

“Because you had greater responsibilities than keeping two individuals safe. That is the dilemma that often faces individuals in temporal displacement situations. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

“I know.” She rested her forearms on the rail. “But right now the needs of those few are a lot more important to me. And I keep thinking about how much I already did change things. I already chose the needs of the few. I abdicated my responsibility to the future by intervening as much as I did, and then I abdicated my responsibility to the past by failing to intervene further.”

“Thus you have convinced yourself of total failure, both now and then.”

“Well—”

“Ilogical.”

He saw a ghost of a smile on her face as she turned to face him. “Okay. That’s starting to sound familiar; Revi said the same thing a few hours ago. I can’t wait for the dissection.”

“Your father was already near the end of the average Human lifespan at that time, was he not?”

“Yes, but—”

“So any further intervention on your part, to prevent his possible death during the bombing, could not have greatly extended his lifespan.”

“No, but that isn’t—”

“Therefore, full intervention would have had minimal impact on the past, but would have had a statistically significant probability of major impact on our present.” He paused to give her time to respond, but when she showed no signs of speaking he continued, “However, the intervention which you did commit had significant impact on the past, in the form of markedly improving the lives of your parents. Though the impact on our present cannot be accurately measured, a review of the possible timelines absent the Human knowledge of warp technology, which your
parents were largely responsible for enabling, would indicate that the current timeline is indeed the most beneficial to the greatest number of individuals. Not just to Humans, but to all of the species in the Federation. It could be argued that the effect extends to a large number of species in the Delta Quadrant as well. You took a very great risk with the futures of billions of individuals, and that risk appears to have paid off. But winning a gamble once does not increase your odds the second time. Any choice other than the one you made could just as easily have destroyed the futures of those same billions of individuals.”

“Whoa.” Her eyes were wide. “Now that I hadn’t thought of. Not like that.”

“It is illogical to berate yourself for not further risking the lives of billions. It is also illogical to allow yourself to focus on a past which cannot be changed, rather than a present, which can. We have a criminal to locate and apprehend. You have a financial empire sitting in limbo, waiting for you to make decisions. The government of the Federation itself is waiting for you to make decisions.” He raised his voice slightly, taking on the tone he often did as her savensu. “A ta’nek does not sit idly by while action is required. Your Savdaa was nearly perfect today. Your actions as a ta’nek are not.”

She stared at him for a long time without speaking, but he had said all that needed to be said. And it was enough, he knew, by the way her gaze sharpened.

“All right, then,” she said, standing up straight and extending an arm toward the door. “Shall we go inside? If I’m not mistaken, you’re in the middle of an investigation.”

“That is correct,” he said, as they moved away from the railing. “Admiral Paris and Captain Janeway are waiting for a progress report.”

She activated the door and stepped inside. “Great,” she said over her shoulder. “Then you can report that my ass has been sufficiently kicked.”
Alison couldn’t help her sense of déjà vu as she stood in the building lobby, waiting for Lynne Hamilton and her entourage. And yet, today’s meeting was going to be a far cry from the first one a week earlier. Then she’d been merely a liaison between Lynne and the board officers. Though the results of that meeting would certainly affect her, she hadn’t been a direct player. Today, however, she was involved in a way she’d never anticipated. And she was quite sure that Brian, Charles and Elise wouldn’t be expecting it either.

Right on time, a large hovercraft purred up the street and landed directly in front of the building entrance. A small mob of people spilled out of it, forming a tight group that moved up the steps toward her. Lynne was in the center, half a head taller than most of the rest of the group, and even from this distance Alison could sense the energy coming off her. It no longer surprised her, however—she’d had ample time to get used to it during the strategy planning sessions at Admiral Paris’ home. It had taken the better part of two days to give Lynne a crash course in board member biographies and personalities, past and current Foundation projects, and some of the intricacies of how the Foundation was tied into Starfleet and Federation programs. Though Lynne had studied the information Alison had sent to Voyager during their communications, it wasn’t the same thing as having a real-time question and answer session. Those sessions had

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been eye-opening for Alison, who had been more and more amazed at how quickly Lynne understood and how much she retained of the enormous amounts of information she was being bombarded with. When Lynne had finally explained exactly what it was that enabled her mental abilities, Alison had needed a little time to adapt to the concept. Even now she could hardly wrap her mind around the idea that her new employer had a Borg implant in her brain.

Besides the Foundation work, Lynne had wanted to know more about her private funds and their management, and they’d spent some time finding the right people to consult. That had been eye-opening, too, for different reasons. Overall, Alison was pleased with the results of the strategy sessions, and had developed an entirely new view of her employer in the process. Her aunt had been right, she’d underestimated the woman. She wouldn’t make that mistake again.

The legal recognition had come through on the first day of their sessions, to everyone’s enormous relief. Lynne had immediately signed the testament and fund management policy that Alison had written earlier, and since they already had the people they needed in Admiral Paris’ house, the signature was properly witnessed and the document filed. Alison had wasted no time notifying the board officers of this development, and the tension in the Paris home had instantly and palpably lessened. If the killer had indeed wanted Lynne dead to prevent any change in the current fund management situation—and Alison couldn’t think of any other possible reason—that incentive was now gone.

The next step was calling a meeting of the board. Not just the officers, but the full board. It was time to introduce Lynne Hamilton as the de jure head of the Foundation.

The large doors whooshed open, and Lynne smiled at her as she came in. She looked every centimeter the executive in her black suit and white shirt, but the polished boots were Starfleet and the long, silver-streaked dark hair was left free instead of worn up in a professional style. Alison knew Lynne’s appearance was just as much a statement as the hovercraft left parked in the street, and guessed that word would be traveling through the Foundation grapevine right about...now.

Behind Lynne were Kathryn, Revi, Seven of Nine, Commander Tuvok, and Saator, Lynne’s lawyer. He had come recommended by Commander Tuvok, and upon checking his background, Alison had found an impres-
sive array of degrees and legal accomplishments. Saator was more than capable of handling anything that might come up during this transition phase, and his Vulcan calm was just as valuable as his experience.

Lynne stopped in front of her. “Long time no see. Ready?”

“Not really,” said Alison truthfully. “But it’s not going to get any better with time, so we might as well get it over with.”

“Yes, it will. Everything does, believe me. Is everyone here?”

“All assembled in the conference room, waiting for the mysterious Ms. Hamilton. Probably not any too patiently, either.”

Lynne held out an arm toward the lift. “Let’s go, then. I’ve got some people to piss off.”

As Alison turned toward the lift, Kathryn fell in beside her. “I’d advise you to take the seat nearest the door,” she said in a low voice, and Alison found herself smiling despite her apprehension.

“You think it’ll be that bad?”

“You’ve seen Lynne these past few days. She’s found an outlet at last.”

Alison didn’t understand the reference, but they were all piling into the lift and she had no time to ask. As they walked down the top floor corridor, she took a few deep breaths to tamp down the tingle in her stomach. For the love of God, she’d been dealing with contentious meetings and powerful people her entire career; this was just one more. There was no reason to be so stressed.

Yes there is, she thought as she arrived at the conference room doors. She reached for the keypad, only to find Lynne’s hand there first.

“If I may,” said Lynne. She tapped the key and strode into the room almost before the doors were fully opened. “Hello, everyone,” she said, dropping her PADD on the shiny surface of the conference table.

Alison was right behind her as the room erupted into a symphony of scraping chairs. All nine members of the Foundation’s board rose, with Brian at the head.

“Ms. Hamilton, it’s good to see you again,” he said. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you. And thank you all for coming on such short notice.” She rested a hand on the chair she’d chosen. It was at the foot of the table, and as the other members of her party filed in to take their seats, Alison realized that this was another intentional visual statement. She wondered if Kathryn had given Lynne a quick training in techniques for commanding a room, because she was already doing an excellent job of it. The mere
fact of her standing at one end of the table, while her party sat around her, had shifted the focus of the room. The foot of the table had just become the head.

“Let me introduce you to the rest of the board,” said Brian. He turned to his left and opened his mouth to speak, but Lynne beat him to it.

“No need,” she said. With a quick stride, she walked to the nearest board member and held out her hand. “Carlos, it’s nice to meet you. I’m guessing Denver is a bit brisk compared with Lisbon this time of year.”

“It is,” said Carlos Mourinho, shaking her hand and looking a little surprised. “But I always like coming here. We don’t get too much snow in Lisbon.”

“No, but you get it in the Serra da Estrela.”

His startled look turned into incredulous appreciation. “You’ve been there?”

“Once, a long time ago. A climbing friend of mine wanted to show me that there were other mountains in Iberia besides the Pyrenees.”

He laughed. “Clearly your friend wasn’t Spanish. They think the Pyrenees are the only mountains in all of southern Europe.”

“No, he was Portuguese,” she agreed. “But now you’ve got me curious. Europe is part of a global government now, but it sounds like a lot of those old regional prejudices still exist.”

“Oh, of course they do. I know you come from the beginning of the twenty-first century, Ms. Hamilton, but that’s less than four centuries ago. Four hundred years isn’t nearly long enough to erase all of those ancient social differences. We might need another thousand.”

She touched him lightly on the arm. “Please, call me Lynne. And I’d love to talk with you about that sometime.”

“It would be my pleasure,” he said, stepping aside to give her room to go on. With a nod, she moved to the next board member and held out her hand.

“Melanie, hello,” she said. “I’m glad to meet another Hamilton. And I’d have recognized you as Elise’s mother even if I hadn’t known it beforehand.”

Melanie glanced over at Elise, who smiled and shrugged. Though Melanie’s hair had long since turned silver while Elise’s was still a glossy black, their light gray eyes were unusual and unmistakable. Turning back,
she took Lynne’s hand and said, “It’s hard to miss that family nose. Her brother Stephen has it, too.”

“But it looks better on me than it does on him,” said Elise, causing a round of chuckles in the room. Not everyone was smiling, though, and Alison noticed that Adele Hamilton wasn’t looking nearly so charmed as the other board members. In fact, her expression was faintly distasteful as she watched Lynne and Melanie making their small talk. Of course, Adele often had that expression, so it was difficult to determine whether it meant anything or not. Sometimes Alison wondered what Charles had been thinking when he married her; they were polar opposites in personality. But perhaps Charles had been looking at something other than her personality.

Lynne made her way methodically around the table, greeting each of the six regular board members by name and putting them at ease with some personal comment. It was an excellent performance, and even though Alison knew exactly how much forethought had gone into producing it, she couldn’t help but be impressed by the result. By the looks on their faces, most of the board members were equally impressed, though at the same time they were still a bit wary of this new person in their midst. Lynne clearly knew a lot about them, but they knew very little about her, and none of the people on this board were the type to be comfortable with an imbalance of information.

After shaking Kirabo Koekemoer’s hand and briefly discussing how far African politics had come in four hundred years, Lynne turned to her own group and began introducing them. She stepped from one to the next as she gave their names and a two- or three-sentence biography, and Alison enjoyed watching as the regular board members realized who their guests were. She thought she even detected a little awe from several of them when Captain Janeway was introduced, but they were all too well-bred to say anything.

“Well, now that the formalities are over, shall we get down to business?” asked Brian. There was a general shuffling as everyone returned to their chairs. Kathryn flashed Alison a quick smile as they sat next to each other, and Alison remembered her comment about sitting close to the door. She glanced toward the door, then back at Kathryn, who covered up a snort and nodded her head.

When the shifting had settled, Brian opened the meeting with the ease
of a man used to control. “Ms. Hamilton, I took the liberty of asking the board to convene an hour prior to your arrival. I’ve briefed everyone on the true history of the Foundation and your role in recent events, so you won’t have to cover that territory.”

“And a few of us were very surprised, I can tell you,” said Kirabo in her rich voice. “We had no idea.”

“Nor were you supposed to,” said Brian patiently. “Not until the situation had been resolved.”

“Yes, but I did notice that we weren’t all surprised,” said Saleh bin Tariq, fixing his dark eyes on Adele.

“Oh, give it a rest,” said Adele. “I don’t think it’s unreasonable that family members would know a family issue before the whole board does.”

“But this is not just a family issue, is it?” asked Carlos.

“Enough,” said Brian, without raising his voice. “Who did or did not know the full truth regarding Ms. Hamilton is no longer important. You all know it now. What we need to be discussing is her place within the Foundation, and its future direction.”

“Are you interested in the day-to-day operations of the Foundation, Ms. Hamilton?” asked Nadia Cristescu.

“Lynne, please, not Ms. Hamilton. And the answer is no, not in the slightest, so don’t be tossing around titles like president. And the CEO post is already taken by someone highly qualified.” She sent a quick smile in Alison’s direction. “I’m interested only in guiding the missions and goals, which would mean a role on the board. Now, I know my parents left instructions that I should take over as Chair. But I also know that I’m not qualified for that. So I’m open to alternative suggestions.”

“Well, a seat on the board shouldn’t be a problem,” said Charles. “As long as you don’t want to be Secretary.” He laughed at his own joke, and Elise chuckled as well.

“Or Vice Chair,” she added. “That one’s taken.”

“Actually,” said Lynne calmly, “I’m not certain that any of the officer positions should be considered taken right now. The board may soon need to reconsider who’s filling which role.”

*Here we go,* thought Alison. She looked around the table and saw the surprise she’d expected. What she hadn’t expected was the brief look of amusement on Carlos’ face.
Brian was the first to recover. “Perhaps you can explain your reasoning behind that suggestion.”

“I’d be happy to. And then you’ll understand why I’ve brought so many guests besides my lawyer, which I’m sure you’ve been wondering about.”

“We have,” said Saleh. Several of the others nodded.

“First I have a question of my own. Brian, did you brief them on the assassination attempt?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And we were horrified, believe me,” put in Melanie. “We are so sorry that you had to go through that. It’s simply incomprehensible.”

“What a terrible homecoming,” added Kirabo. A general murmur of agreement filled the room.

“Thank you,” said Lynne, looking at each in turn. “Unfortunately, there was not just one attempt. There were two.” Over the gasps, she continued, “The second was four days ago, on a ski run in the middle of nowhere. They not only knew where I was, they even had my resort badge information. And they ruined my best run of the day. But at least this time they were just trying to kill me, and not my friends as well.”

Several of the board members spoke at once.

“How did you escape?”

“What happened?”

“Did they get away?” That last was from Charles, and Alison looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“Damn it!” swore Brian. “Why didn’t you stay at Starfleet Headquarters?”

“Because the first attempt took place on Voyager, right on the front lawn of Starfleet Headquarters, with a full contingent of security officers on board. Starfleet can’t keep me safe. For all we know, there might be Starfleet personnel involved.” She shifted her gaze to Charles. “And no, they didn’t get away.”

Once again the members talked over each other, but they all seemed to be asking the same question. Lynne raised her voice to be heard. “I don’t know how it happened. That’s what we’d like to find out. But we do know one thing: someone tried to have me killed after my first meeting here, after the officers of this board knew that I was who I claimed to be. Clearly, that person—or persons—had a very great interest in making sure
that my identity was never confirmed by the Federation. If I’d died before that confirmation, and before my testament could be filed, the current arrangement regarding my trust fund and its managers would have remained static.”

All of the board members turned toward the other end of the table, where Brian, Charles and Elise sat with nearly identical expressions of dismay. Brian shook his head. “You can all stop looking at me like that. I had nothing to do with it. I’m just as shocked as you are. Actually I’m outraged.”

“So am I.” “Me too,” said Elise and Charles at the same time.

“God,” added Elise, “this is unbelievable! No one even knew where you were! We offered you the full financial capacity of the Foundation to take whatever security precautions you needed. We tried to protect you.”

“That’s the problem. I can’t trust that you weren’t simply trying give the appearance of protecting me,” said Lynne. She held up her hand, forestalling their objections. “I’m not accusing any of you. I can’t, there isn’t enough evidence. But I have to acknowledge that the officers of this board are the three most likely suspects of my attempted murder.”

“And that is the reason for my presence,” said Commander Tuvok, speaking for the first time.

“You’re her bodyguard?” asked Carlos.

“No, that would be me,” said Kathryn.

“And me,” added Revi.

“And me.” Seven looked around the room as if daring any one of them to try anything.

Lynne’s lips twitched into a tiny smile, but Tuvok went on as if they hadn’t spoken. “I’m here as a representative of Starfleet, in whose jurisdiction this investigation has fallen. When this board meeting is concluded, I would like to speak with the three of you.”

“We’re under investigation?” asked Charles incredulously.

“Of course we are,” said Brian, giving his son-in-law an almost contemptuous look. “We will be happy to give you any information you require, Commander. The sooner this is cleared up, the better off we’ll all be.”

“Speak for yourself,” said Elise. She was rigid in her chair, and her speech had become clipped. “I for one am not happy at all. I’ve done nothing and I don’t appreciate being accused of murder.”
“Attempted murder,” corrected Tuvok.

“Whatever! I didn’t do it! And I can’t believe Brian or Charles would, either. You’re looking at the wrong people, Commander. We didn’t even know where she was. How did the killer know that, hm?” She turned a hard stare on Alison. “As I recall, you were the only person they trusted with that information. Are you investigating her, too?”

“I already have.”

Alison looked at him, startled. “And?” Elise demanded.

“She is not a suspect at this time. She had nothing to gain by the death of Ms. Hamilton.”

“Well then, how did it happen? How did that information get out?”

Alison met her stare with a schooled expression of calm. “Someone planted a microtransmitter in my office. I have no idea how long it was there, but someone has been listening to everything I’ve said, and everything anyone else in my office has said. Which is how they heard Lynne and Kathryn tell me where they were going.”

“Jesus,” murmured Nadia.

Elise’s glare did not diminish at this news, but Alison refused to back down. Only when Tuvok spoke again did Elise look away, leaving Alison to take a quiet, calming breath. Emotions were already running high, and the meeting had barely started.

“We’re tracing the components of the transmitter now,” Tuvok was saying. “In addition, I’ll be speaking to Foundation employees, attempting to determine who had access to Dr. Necheyev’s office. The assassins are professionals, but the person or persons who hired them are not. We will find out who is responsible.”

The room was quiet for a moment. Tuvok’s voice had carried absolute certainty, and Alison for one believed him. He had a way of inspiring confidence.

“Which brings us back to the issue of the officer positions,” said Lynne. “It’s very likely that this board will experience a shakeup when Tuvok’s investigation is concluded. However, I have no intention of waiting for the end of that investigation to do a little shaking up of my own.”

“With all due respect,” said Brian, “we’ve held no elections. It may be merely a formality, but you’re not even a member of this board yet. I don’t
blame you for wanting to take some form of action, but acting out against us when you have no proof is not in your best interests.”

“I have no intention of dictating to this board. It will make its own decisions regarding the officers when that time comes. But I do have full control over my personal trust fund now, and that also means control over my choice of fund managers. And I’m not interested in retaining fund managers who are currently under suspicion of trying to murder me. So consider this your notice. Brian, Charles, Elise—as of this moment you’re all fired.”

“What?” Charles was white faced.

“I recognize that this is completely unfair to whichever of you are not involved in this mess,” Lynne continued, ignoring Charles. “So here’s the deal. Help Tuvok find out who’s responsible. You’re the ones who know each other the best. You’re our best hope of catching whoever considers my life, and the lives of my friends and crewmates, to be worth less than an annual income. When this is resolved, I’ll revisit today’s decision. But until then, your income from my funds has just come to an end. Your names have already been removed from all of my holdings. Mr. Saator has copies of the notifications for each of you; we’ll need your thumbprint signatures to acknowledge that you’ve received them.” She took a breath. “I apologize to those of you for whom this is an unjust punishment, but it has to stand until I know who I can trust.”

“You can’t—” Adele began, but then stopped, her lips pressed in a thin line. Lynne watched her, waiting for her to finish the sentence, but Adele sat back in her chair and glared at her husband. For his part, Charles looked positively ill.

“Ms. Hamilton is well within her rights.” Saator’s voice was deep and measured, his Vulcan calm a contrast to the tension in the room. “The moment her identity was confirmed by the Federation, she assumed ownership over her trust fund. How she chooses to administer those funds is now entirely up to her.”

“Of course it is,” said Brian, his eyes on Lynne. “But I would caution you against making hasty decisions. Your funds are immense and complex. Firing the three people who are the most familiar with the complexities may cause financial consequences that will be very difficult to recover from.”

“I realize that. But I have two things in my favor. One, I have more
money than God. I could lose ninety-nine percent of it and still be wealthier than I’ve ever dreamed. And two, I’ve already hired an excellent manager.”

“For your sake I hope he’s extremely competent,” Brian said.

“Well, I haven’t known her long, but Dr. Necheyev strikes me as one of the most competent people I’ve ever met.”

Alison braced herself as every eye in the room turned to her. Carlos had that amused expression on his face again, Kirabo and Nadia actually looked rather admiring, and Saleh was clearly surprised. But the five Hamiltons on the board were staring at her with varying mixtures of disbelief, contempt, and anger.

“You have got to be kidding me,” said Elise. “She’s not a financial analyst!”

“No, but neither are you,” said Alison. “You contracted that responsibility out to another firm. I can do the same thing.”

“You think it’s that easy? An investment firm can’t make the decisions. Are you qualified to do that?”

“Dr. Necheyev is responsible only for the bottom line,” said Lynne. “How she gets there is her own business. If she contracts the majority of that task to a reputable firm, that’s fine with me. At least she has the capability of determining which firm that should be, and monitoring its progress, which is more than I can do at the moment. Besides, she has the same incentive to succeed that the fund managers have always had—two and a half percent of the annual gains. Times three, of course, since she’s now the only manager.”

“You’re giving her seven and a half percent?” asked Charles faintly.

“Oh, this is rich!” Elise was bristling. “Don’t you see what’s going on here? She’s the only one who knew where you were, someone tries to kill you, and now you’re rewarding her?”

“Ms. Hamilton,” rumbled Saator, “I am not your lawyer, but I would nevertheless caution you against making such accusations.”

Next to him, Tuvok nodded. “Dr. Necheyev has been eliminated from my list of suspects. You have not.”

Elise gave him a look that Alison interpreted as eliminate this, then turned to her uncle. “Then perhaps the board should take a vote on whether to retain Dr. Necheyev as CEO. Since there seems to be a conflict of interest here.”
“You will not have my support if you call that to vote,” said Kirabo immediately. “My oath was to uphold the best interests of the Foundation. Firing Dr. Necheyev based on suspicion, despite her having been cleared of all wrongdoing by a Starfleet investigation, would not be in those interests. If we did that, we might as well fire the officers as well. Until we have proof, this board should not take any action to remove any individual.”

Saleh, Carlos and Nadia all nodded, quietly voicing agreement, but Elise was not in the mood for sensibility. “I’m sure we could come up with a majority without your assistance,” she said. “Not without me,” said Brian. As Elise stared at him in surprise, he added, “Kirabo’s right. In addition, there is no conflict of interest. Lynne’s private trust is separate from the Foundation funds, just as it was when we managed it. So long as Dr. Necheyev has the time—and the expertise—then she’s fully capable of fulfilling her duty to both without compromising one or the other.”

“Thank you,” said Alison. “I recognize my own lack of expertise in this matter, and though I’ll certainly do my best, it’s not a position I would have applied for under ordinary circumstances.”

“Oh, I suppose you’re doing it as a favor,” said Adele.

“Actually, I am.”

Adele and Elise let out nearly identical snorts. Though Melanie hadn’t said anything, her expression was thunderous. Charles still seemed to be in a state of shocked disbelief, but Brian was looking at her thoughtfully. Then he shifted his gaze to Lynne and said, “Dr. Necheyev has performed admirably for the Foundation, and I’ve no doubt she’ll do the same for you, so far as it’s within her capabilities. But she understands the limitations of those capabilities, perhaps better than you do. I would strongly urge you to retain at least one other manager who is more experienced in the demands of the position. This is not a request for reinstatement. It’s merely advice.”

“I understand,” said Lynne. “And I appreciate it. But all of you seem to think this is about money, and whether or not my funds keep making more of it. It’s not about that at all. It’s about who I can trust, and that’s Alison. She wasn’t lying when she said this was a favor to me—I had to talk her into it. But the sad truth is, I’m sitting in a room full of Hamil-
tons, and I don’t know which of them might have tried to kill me. Appar-
ently family doesn’t mean the same thing it did in my time.”

The room was silent for a moment as her words sank in. Then Carlos
leaned forward and said, “With all due respect, you’re wrong about that.
Family does mean the same thing now as it did then. Or it should.”

Kirabo nodded. “That’s right. I’m appalled at the homecoming you’ve
received. Your family name should tell you precisely who you can trust.
That it does not is a grave injustice, and I sincerely hope that no one in this
room is responsible for that.”

“It’s more than an injustice,” said Saleh. “It is morally wrong. Please
don’t take this as an example of how our culture is based in this century.
If you bore the name of bint Tariq I would embrace you as my own, and
protect you against all who would wish you harm. That’s the blessing and
the responsibility of family.” His thick eyebrows drew together as he
looked at Elise. “One of your own has come back to your family from the
past, and your response is to propose firing the one person that Lynne
feels she can trust? Simply because she trusts her? There are no words to
politely express what I think of that.”

“Thank you,” Lynne said. “I appreciate that support. And I’m sure you
can all understand why I had to remove any financial incentive for killing
me, regardless of who might or might not be involved. You should also
know that I’ve gone to the media. No, not about the murder attempts,” she
added as several board members started to speak. “I don’t want any nega-
tive publicity for the Foundation. But I’ve been informed that eventually
the word will get out about who I am and where—or when I came from. I
decided to make that happen sooner rather than later. You’ll be seeing it on
FedComm tomorrow. So if I suddenly die a mysterious death, there’s going
to be a media storm descending on the Hamilton Foundation. Whoever is
responsible for this is now operating in a very public arena.”

“Smart,” said Nadia. “I think you’ve taken some very necessary steps.
Difficult, but necessary. And I hope this situation is resolved very soon,
not just for your sake but also for the sake of the Foundation.” She looked
around the table. “Shall we get back to our agenda, then? We were
discussing which role Lynne will play on the board.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” said Saleh. “There really is only one
position that makes sense, both in terms of her current capabilities and
her future path. I move that we elect Lynne Hamilton to the board—as Vice Chair.”

“Excuse me?” said Elise in disbelief.

“What’s your rationale, Saleh?” asked Brian. “I trust you’re making this motion in the interest of the Foundation, and not as a punitive measure against Elise.”

“I hope you know me better than that. Lynne has already said she’s not interested in the day-to-day operations, so positioning her as president is not an option. She is interested in directing policy. That means she’s best suited to the board. Now it has always been clear that the Foundation is a family operation—the fact that the Hamiltons hold a majority on the board makes that self-evident. So family should be taken into consideration when deciding her role on the board. As the senior member by far of the Hamilton family, as the daughter of the founders, and—as we’ve just learned—the reason this Foundation even exists, I believe she should hold the role of Chair. This is also the role the founders wished her to take. But it’s also clear that she’s not yet ready for that responsibility, and won’t be until she’s learned far more about not just the Foundation, but the world in which it operates. So she needs a role that not only acknowledges her status, but enables her to learn what she should know before assuming the Chair. And the best position for accomplishing both of those objectives is that of Vice Chair.”

Alison sat back in her seat, fighting down a smile. It was precisely what Lynne had been aiming for, but she hadn’t wanted to be the one to suggest it. Now that Saleh had done it for her, it would be difficult for the Board to reject—largely because it made perfect sense.

By the expression on his face, Brian thought so too. “Does anyone else have further input for Saleh’s proposal?”

“Just that I agree with it,” said Kirabo. “I think it’s an elegant solution for a rather unusual situation.”

“Elegant for everyone but Elise,” said Melanie. “She’s done a fine job as Vice Chair and had every reason to expect that she would take over as Chair upon Brian’s retirement. How can we expect her to step down now, simply because we need to find a position for Lynne? Is that really in the best interest of the Foundation, to lose Elise’s expertise and replace it with a complete lack of it? No offense,” she added, glancing at Lynne.

“None taken,” said Lynne mildly. “But you might find that I have
more expertise than you’re assuming. For instance, I know that before the abrupt shift in policy caused by my parents’ orders, the Foundation was considering the possibility of branching out into research on teleportation, which has the potential of revolutionizing space travel but also carries an extremely high cost-to-results ratio. It would be a substantial shift of funding. I’m familiar with the current body of study in that field, and I can make a valuable contribution to our discussion of whether Foundation funds should be risked on that concept. I also know every project the Foundation has funded in the last ten years, what it’s funding now, what it’s considering funding in the future, and what Starfleet is asking it to support. And I’m familiar with how the Foundation, Starfleet, and the Federation have grown together, and what the political, economic and military ramifications of our current policy have been.”

Half of the board was looking at Lynne with expressions of surprised approval, but not everyone was impressed.

“So you’ve done your homework, then,” said Adele, dismissing what Alison knew had been a heroic effort. “That’s admirable, but being Vice Chair isn’t just about knowing where the Foundation is spending its money. It’s also about knowing how to bring more money in. It’s about knowing the right people, and recruiting them into our interests. You may be intelligent and prepared, but that kind of social network can’t be crammed into an all-night study session. It has to be developed. Elise has been developing hers all her adult life.”

“That would be the point of making her Vice Chair,” said Kirabo patiently. “So that Brian could take her under his wing and bring her into that network. The title is important to that objective. Which is why I’m seconding the motion.”

Alison noted that Kirabo was assuming Brian’s innocence, but she could certainly understand it. She was having a hard time suspecting him, too, and his behavior in this meeting was making it even more difficult.

“Elise will not be losing her place on the board,” added Carlos. “Her expertise, her experience, her knowledge and her network will all continue to be available to the Foundation—unless she chooses to resign, of course. Saleh is only proposing a change of title.”

“Don’t even pretend that title doesn’t mean something.” Melanie seemed to be entering a parental mode of defending her daughter, and had
given up attempting to sound impartial. “She’s worked for it and she’s earned it.”

“I agree,” said Charles, who had finally recovered his voice. “Elise has worked for this board since practically the moment she finished her graduate degree. She has earned her title.”

“Lynne has survived alien abduction, temporal displacement, Borg assimilation, life-threatening injuries in a firefight, and two assassination attempts just to sit here in this room and speak to you about her parents’ legacy,” said Alison. “What has that earned her?”

The entire board looked over at Lynne in startled silence.

“Brian,” said Kirabo, “I think that biography you gave us of Lynne was missing a few important parts.”

“I think so too,” said Brian, still staring. He shook his head and said, “I’m satisfied that the motion was brought with an appropriate purpose. I also think further discussion is probably not going to change anyone’s mind about their vote. So—all in favor?”

Saleh, Kirabo, Carlos and Nadia all lifted their hands. “Aye.”

“And against.”

Charles, Melanie, Elise and Adele raised theirs. “Nay.”

Alison almost rolled her eyes. That couldn’t possibly have been more predictable—a Hamilton party-line vote. Elise was already looking triumphant, but Brian’s gaze was on Lynne.

“Before I give my vote, I want you to understand something about the Chair’s role on this board. Where the other members must look to the interests of the Foundation, I have the additional responsibility of interpreting the original wishes of the founders. Most of the time, those wishes coincide with what we feel is in the Foundation’s interests. Occasionally, such as when we radically altered our mission upon discovering your existence, they do not. Interpreting the wishes of people who formed a foundation nearly four hundred years ago is not always easy, nor is it something I’m always comfortable doing. I think, however, that would be a valuable role you could bring to the board. You know better than anyone here what your parents would have wanted.”

Lynne nodded, waiting.

“Elise is my niece. I’ve groomed her for the position of Chair, and she has a great deal of valuable experience. If I were voting solely on what I felt to be the best interests of the Foundation, I would vote nay. But this is
one of those times when interpreting the founders’ wishes is quite simple. This is the Lynne D. Hamilton Foundation. Your parents wanted you as its head. So I have to vote aye.” His gaze shifted to Elise, who was staring at him in silent shock. “I’m sorry, Elise. That’s my decision.”

“And it’s a bad one,” said Melanie. “I disagree with your reasoning and I think you put entirely too much weight on interpretation.”

“There’s no interpretation involved,” he said patiently. “Lynne’s parents created this Foundation with the single purpose of enabling technology that would put the Human race into the stars. They didn’t do that solely out of a desire to advance science. They did it to make sure that when the time came, we’d have the technology to rescue their daughter. They even left orders that if Lynne were found, the entire resources of the Foundation should be diverted specifically to technologies that could bring her home. And then they left the future of the Foundation in her hands. This board isn’t deciding what the current mission should be, she is. Unless she chooses to bring the board into that discussion. Now, if she wanted, she could have walked in here, acknowledged her identity, and told us to carry on while she got back to her life. She has chosen instead to take an active role. I don’t think the board can do anything else but honor what her parents clearly wished for her.”

“Her parents couldn’t have had any idea what this Foundation would turn into,” argued Melanie. “They could never have anticipated its impact on an entire interplanetary government. If they had, they wouldn’t have left such decisions in the hands of someone they knew could not possibly be prepared for them. You’re making assumptions, and dangerous ones at that. This is a decision that has long term ramifications for the Foundation.”

“Yes, it does. And exactly what those ramifications are depends entirely on Lynne.” He turned his gaze on the subject of their argument.

“I understand,” said Lynne. “Believe me, I want what’s best for the Foundation. My parents left me a legacy, and it’s all I have left of them. So you can bet that I’ll do everything in my power to keep that legacy strong.”

“That’s all we can ask for. In fact, that’s nearly the wording of your officer’s oath,” said Brian. He looked around the table. “The vote stands, and I don’t see any advantage in discussing it further.”

“Then I resign as Secretary,” said Charles.
“What?! Why?” demanded Adele, staring at her husband.

“Because it’s not fair that I should hold an officer’s position when Elise isn’t. I joined this board when I married into the family; she’s been here a lot longer.”

“Thanks, Charles,” said Elise. “But I’m not sure that’s fair to you either. And frankly, I don’t really want to be Secretary.”

“Hasn’t anyone considered the option of co-vice chairs?” asked Lynne. “Or isn’t that done anymore?”

The board members looked at each other.

“Well, that is an old fashioned solution,” said Nadia. “But it might suit.”

Brian’s surprise was showing on his face. “I remember reading about that in a history text, years ago. I’m sorry I never thought of it. It would certainly raise eyebrows in the business community, but...do we care?”

“I’m not sure why it should raise eyebrows,” said Lynne, “but I think the fact that you’ve got a four-hundred-year-old woman on your board will already do that. So why not raise them a little higher?”

“What do you think, Elise?” asked Saleh. “To be honest, if I’d remembered that from my own history courses, I’d have proposed that instead.”

“I think I’d rather not lose something I’ve worked my entire adult life for. If that means sharing the role, then I guess I have no choice. Though the title is ridiculous.” Elise looked over at Lynne. “Thank you for making the offer.”

“You’re welcome.”

“It won’t be a ridiculous title forever,” said Brian. “Let’s not forget that Lynne’s position as Vice Chair is fully intended to prepare her for the role as Chair. When I resign, she’ll take my title and you can drop the ‘co’ from yours.”

Elise looked as if she were about to say something, but managed to stop herself. Alison thought she could make a pretty good guess at what had been going through her mind, though. ‘Small consolation’ didn’t begin to cover what the former heir apparent must be feeling.

When the motion was put to a vote, it passed unanimously, though the ‘ayes’ of Elise, Melanie and Adele were notable for their lack of enthusiasm.

“Let the record show that Lynne and Elise Hamilton are now Co-Vice Chairs of the board,” said Brian. “Welcome to the board, Lynne.”
“Thank you.”

Most of the other members echoed Brian’s welcome, but before the moment could become awkward due to a lack of full participation, Brian moved them on to the next topic.

“We have one other important bit of business to cover: the mission of the Foundation. We altered it in late 2376, when news of Lynne’s existence activated the old instructions of her parents. Those instructions have now been fulfilled. In fact, the original purpose of the Foundation’s very existence has been fulfilled. We now stand on the edge of a new era. Lynne, this is the one matter of Foundation business for which you have sole voting privileges, though you may choose to put it to a board vote if you wish. If you choose to return the Foundation to its original mission, it can be accomplished immediately. If you are considering any other alternative, I would strongly recommend that you open it to a board discussion and vote. Since you’ve educated yourself on the various ramifications of our current situation, I’m sure you understand that this is a decision of paramount importance. It would not be in the best interests of the Foundation to make any sort of hasty or uninformed decision.”

“I understand that,” said Lynne. “Which is precisely why I’m not prepared to make a decision at this time.”

“Oh, here we go.” Adele rolled her eyes. “Is this what you all wanted when you elected her Vice Chair? What the hell decision is there to make? Just tell us that you want to return the mission to its original wording. It’s not that hard.”

“Hey, Adele?” Lynne waited until their eyes met. “Shut up.” As Adele’s mouth dropped open in surprise, Lynne added, “I’m not some idiot off the street, and I don’t appreciate being treated that way. If you think I’m going to politely sit here and let shitty little comments like that go by me, then you’d better think again.” She looked around the table. “I said I’d do my best to keep my parents’ legacy strong, and I meant that. This policy has stood for fourteen months; it can stand for another few days or weeks. I promise that we’ll revisit it just as soon as I have the necessary information for an informed choice. As Brian said, this is a decision of paramount importance. I’m not rushing into anything. In the meantime, if anyone has firm ideas of other funding directions that the Foundation might consider, please send them to me. I’d like to take a little time to get more thor-
oughly acquainted with the possibilities before bringing the discussion back to the board.”

“Then you do plan to bring it before the board,” said Brian. “Are you also planning to share the responsibility of this decision?”

“When was the board scheduled for its next regular meeting?” she asked.

“In three weeks.”

“I’ll let you know then.”

The room was quiet for a few moments, until Brian said, “Well, that was possibly the shortest policy discussion we’ve ever had. Is there any other business we need to discuss?” He met each board member’s eyes in turn and waited as they shook their heads. “Then we’re adjourned. Our next meeting will be at the normal time, unless Lynne notifies me earlier that she’s come to a resolution on the matter of our mission. Lynne, I’ll have your officer’s oath sent to you for thumbprint signature.”

Amid the general shuffling of chairs, Alison leaned over to Kathryn and murmured, “She got what she wanted. But she also has Adele and Melanie in a solid bloc against her, probably Charles too since he won’t often go against his wife, and she made a serious enemy out of Adele within two minutes of her election.”

“I know,” said Kathryn. “I’m amazed it took her that long.”
“You know what?” asked Lynne as she accepted a glass of soda and lime from Alison. “That was actually fun! I think I could get into this.”

Kathryn couldn’t help but smile at her wife. With the exception of Tuvok and Saator, who were now speaking with the officers of the board, their group had moved to Alison’s office for refreshments and a little post-meeting relaxation. The last time they’d been here, Lynne had just survived a Cardassian attack and was shaken, angry, distrustful and more than a little lost. Now she was smiling at Alison and glowing with the knowledge that she was in the game, rather than just a victim of it.

What a difference eight days made.

When Kathryn had asked Tuvok to speak with Lynne in San Diego, she’d hoped he could get through to her. What she hadn’t dared hope was that he would reawaken the competitive instinct that was so much a part of who Lynne was. But the moment Lynne had come back into the house with him, something was different. She’d listened to his progress report in silence, but her whole body radiated determination and a kind of edgy impatience. The evidence Tuvok had already gathered seemed to galvanize her further, and when he was finished, she sketched out a strategy that had surprised Kathryn. For a while, Lynne hadn’t even been sure she wanted anything to do with the Foundation. Now she wanted to run it?

When she’d had a chance to ask about it, Lynne had shrugged and
said, “I’ve been sitting on my ass long enough. It’s time to get off it and do something. Besides, these people are pissing me off. They’re holding my parents’ legacy, and at least one of them is making a mockery out of it. And that I will not stand for.” But Kathryn knew there was a little more to it than that. After being tumbled around by events out of her control, Lynne had finally stopped, dug her heels in, and taken charge. It was good to see.

Kathryn accepted her own glass from Alison and raised it in a toast. “To the new Co-Vice Chair of the Hamilton Foundation board!”

“Hear, hear!” Five glasses clinked together as Revi, Seven, Alison and Lynne joined her in the toast.

“So it was fun, huh?” asked Revi when they’d finished their drink. “Funny, a couple of days ago you were dreading it. I distinctly recall being asked to attend just for moral support.”

“Haven’t you ever dreaded something you weren’t sure you were ready for? And then when you actually pulled it off, you wanted to go back and do it again?”

“I don’t think anyone else in that room would want to do that again,” said Kathryn. “They’ve been traumatized enough for one day.” Lynne beamed at her before taking another sip.

“I would never have thought of that co-chair strategy,” Alison said. “There’s one advantage you’ve got that nobody else can touch—a knowledge of arcane business practices.”

“Thanks. My arcane knowledge has come in handy a couple of times.” Lynne winked at her. “But really, I don’t know a lot about business. I tried to stay away from that stuff.”

“I’m curious,” said Seven. “If you knew that being a co-chair would satisfy your purpose, why didn’t you suggest it earlier, when the board was debating whether Elise should give way to you? It would have saved a great deal of time and probably some negative consequences. It’s clear that Melanie, Adele, Charles and Elise all feel that you’re encroaching on Elise’s territory.”

“Because of that very reason. If I’d proposed co-chair right away, then Elise would have been sharing her title and power with me. But when I was voted Vice Chair first, and then proposed to share it, that meant I was sharing my title and power with her. Completely different dynamic.”

“And very strategic,” said Alison, her eyebrows lifted as she looked at
Lynne in some surprise. “I’m impressed. Didn’t you just say you don’t know much about business?”

“I don’t. That’s not business, that’s human nature.”

“Half of business is human nature. And another quarter is plain common sense. I’d say you’re doing fine in both departments.”

“Well, you certainly lit a plasma fire under the officers,” said Revi. “Did you see Charles’ face when he realized he’d just lost his income? I thought I might have to break out the cortical stimulator.”

“He did look pretty sick, didn’t he?” Alison swirled the ice in her drink. “But Adele just looked pissed off.”

“I think Adele looks like that most of the time anyway,” said Lynne, and Alison laughed.

“I can’t comment. Unlike you, I’m an employee here.”

“Well then, let me say it for you. Adele is just a class-A bitch, and I was happy for the chance to take her down a notch.”

“Oh, so that’s the ‘fun’ part you were referring to.” Kathryn nudged Lynne with her hip.

“Well…yeah. I mean, come on! She was nasty to Alison and she was nasty to me. She doesn’t even know me. She just has that ‘I’m better than you’ attitude that sends me right off the deep end. I never did tolerate that very well.”

Revi snorted, and Seven turned to look at her. “I still don’t understand that aspect of humor,” she said.

“What aspect?” asked Kathryn.

“I believe you call it ‘stating the obvious.’ I don’t see how verbally confirming a fact already universally known can incite amusement.”

“You mean that Lynne’s intolerance of people like Adele is a universally known fact?” asked Alison.

“Yes,” said three voices in unison, and Alison laughed.

“Like I’m the only one in the room with that character trait,” said Lynne. “That’s part of the humor, Seven. It’s not just that I stated the obvious. It’s that everyone here is exactly the same way.”

“That’s not true,” protested Kathryn. “I think I tolerate that attitude better than most. I have to, it’s part of my job.” She was a little taken aback when Lynne, Seven and Revi all gave her knowing smiles. “What? You don’t agree?”

“Um, love, you just spent the last seven years of your life as queen of 285
all you surveyed,” said Lynne, putting an arm around her waist. “You didn’t have anyone who thought they were better than you.”

“Oh, no. I completely disagree. And I can point to an example right here in this room.” Kathryn looked over at Seven, who actually appeared a little embarrassed.

“Seven is not even remotely in the same category as Adele,” said Revi loyally. “If she thought she was better at anything, it’s because she actually was.”

“Sometimes.” Kathryn was willing to admit that much. “But even leaving Seven out of it, I put up with a lot of bloated egos outside of our crew. I lost track of how many egotistical morons we had to deal with.”

“That’s true,” conceded Lynne. “But by the time you were finished dealing with them, their egos were usually badly punctured. Which sort of illustrates my point.”

“Perhaps we should allow Kathryn to puncture Elise’s ego,” said Seven. “It seems to be in need of adjustment.” Kathryn raised a glass to her, silently acknowledging the way she’d shifted the topic. For Seven, it was a rather smooth maneuver.

“She was a bit nasty,” said Alison, effortlessly taking the new lead. “Actually I was surprised; she’s usually very poised.”

“It’s not every day that someone gets their income cut off,” said Revi. “Stress changes people’s behavior.”

“Didn’t seem to change Brian’s.” Alison shook her head. “He really is a professional. If it turns out to be him, I’m never going to trust my judgment in people again.”

“That would surprise me, too,” Lynne agreed. “And I don’t think it’s Elise either.”

“Why not?” asked Kathryn.

“Because she was all over Alison like a ton of bricks. That kind of redirection would be too obvious if she were actually responsible.”

“Or she may be expecting others to think exactly that,” Revi pointed out. “My money is on Adele. She knew about Lynne because Charles told her. So she knew her lifestyle was at risk. And she looks just nasty enough to take action to prevent that.”

“What about Melanie?” asked Kathryn. “She knew, too, through Elise.”

“Yes, but she doesn’t have any motive,” said Alison. “Adele is
connected directly through Charles; his loss is her loss. But Melanie’s wealth comes from the general Hamilton fortune, so it doesn’t depend on who the fund managers are.”

“Well, Tuvok is looking into everyone’s finances,” said Kathryn. “If there’s any clue there, he’ll find it.”

“I fail to understand the point of this discussion,” said Seven. “We have no more actual evidence now than we did prior to the meeting. You’re all theorizing without basis.”

“Maybe we’re theorizing just for the fun of it,” said Lynne, and Kathryn smothered a laugh at the look on Seven’s face.

“Seven’s right,” she said. “We don’t know any more now than we did before, other than a few behavioral observations. Hopefully Tuvok is being more productive than we are.”

“He could hardly be otherwise,” Seven muttered.

“So how was your day?” Aunt Alynna settled back on her couch and looked at the viewscreen expectantly.

“Interesting,” said Alison. She tipped the bottle, carefully filling her glass. She’d just gotten home, and her aunt was clearly ahead of her in the relaxation department. Which was a sad statement, considering that San Francisco was an hour behind Denver. “What are you doing home so early?”

“Tomorrow’s going to be a long day.” The admiral took a sip of her vodka and sighed appreciatively. “Janeway will be back for the debriefings, and we’ve got a lot of ground to cover. Plus we have to prep her for the publicity tour and wrap up all the arrangements. So I thought I’d give myself an early night before all hell breaks loose.”

“You realize she’s dreading the parades.”

Aunt Alynna’s grin didn’t look in the least bit sympathetic. “Tough for her. She’s the best thing to happen to our publicity branch since the Treaty of Bajor was signed. She’ll just have to live with it.”

“Poor Kathryn.” Alison sipped her own vodka. “It’s a good thing we don’t have these little chats every day. I’d be asking for a raise to cover my vodka bill.”

“Well, you could drink something less than the best.”
“No, I couldn’t. Not at home. I had replicated vodka at the office today and it instantly reminded me of why I treat myself to the good stuff at home. Yick. I find it amazing that we can take a human being apart at the molecular level, reassemble her with one hundred percent accuracy, and still not get vodka right.”

“And a good thing for Russia that we can’t. Now, let’s get back to you. Tell me about the meeting.”

“It was short and sweet. Lynne got everything she wanted except possibly the goodwill of a few of the Hamiltons.”

“Didn’t make friends, eh?”

“Not exactly. She’s not very tactful.” Alison smiled at the memory. “She told Adele Hamilton to shut up, and characterized one of her statements as a ‘shitty little comment.’”

That got a laugh out of her aunt. “Perfect,” she said. “I knew she’d fit right in. So, was it?”

“A shitty little comment? Oh, yes. Adele’s used to the perks that the Hamilton name gives her. She doesn’t think she has to play by the same rules everyone else does. But today she ran into someone else who doesn’t play by the rules. Whose name is Hamilton, and who is not on her side. It shocked the hell out of her.”

“And how did the managers react to being fired?”

“Well, they were all a bit stunned. Brian recovered first. Charles looked like he needed to find the nearest restroom. And Elise—actually, I think Elise was more upset about losing her title and her fast-track to the Chair position than she was about losing her income.” Alison remembered the glare Elise had given her and amended, “Which is not to say she wasn’t pissed about that. If looks could kill, I wouldn’t be talking to you right now.”

“You knew that would happen.”

“I expected it, yes. I still didn’t like it.”

Aunt Alynna nodded thoughtfully. “You’re used to the power of the back rooms. This is your first time being right up front and center. Makes you a much bigger target, doesn’t it?”

“I felt like I had a bullseye painted on my forehead.” Alison sighed. “I would really have preferred not to get involved this way. I’ve put in hours and hours trying to get a handle on Lynne’s holdings, but it’s like learning the complete budget of an interplanetary corporation. It’s going to take a
while before I can see how all the pieces fit together and where everything 
is.”

“Is that what she expects?” asked the admiral shrewdly.

“No,” Alison admitted. “She said she didn’t even care if she lost money, since to her mind she never had it in the first place. But I care. I’m not going to take this on and fail.”

“Which is probably why she asked you to take it on.”

“I don’t think so. She asked me because she trusts me. Which still makes my head spin a little bit, considering that four days ago she was here in this house, threatening me with God knows what because she thought I’d betrayed her.”

“I’m still not happy about that,” said Aunt Alynna. “Next time I see her I’m going to make sure she knows it.”

“Well, she had reason—”

“I don’t care. You didn’t deserve it.”

Alison hid a smile behind her glass as she sipped. Long ago, she’d been bullied while playing in a park near her aunt’s house, and within minutes of arriving back at the house in tears she’d watched as her aunt had marched outside, still in full uniform, and proceeded to put the fear of God and Necheyev into those boys. The sense of utter protection she’d felt then was very similar to what she was feeling now, despite the fact that she was several decades older and a lot more capable of taking care of herself. Everyone, she decided, should have someone ready to ride to her rescue.

“No, but she apologized pretty nicely and then offered me the biggest raise in the history of mankind, so I’m not too upset anymore,” she said.

“Well, at least she knows how to apologize. I imagine she’s had a great deal of practice, with that attitude.”

Now it was Alison’s turn to laugh. “That attitude? You mean the same type you have? And how often do you apologize for it, Aunt Alynna?”

“Never mind that.” The admiral frowned, but Alison knew it was for show. “At any rate, she has redeemed herself somewhat. And I’m very glad this little puppet show is finally over. She’s official now, right?”

“Right,” said Alison, dreading the next question.

“So the Foundation mission has been reversed?”

“Oh…not exactly.”

“What? Why the hell not?”
“Lynne wants to explore the possibilities before making a decision.”

“My rosy ass she does!” The admiral thumped her glass onto the table and leaned forward. “The first thing she ever said to you was that she wanted to reverse that mission, and now all of a sudden she wants to ‘explore possibilities'? I’m not buying this for a second. What’s really going on?”

Alison put her own glass down. “We’ve just hit a little bump. Lynne is truly my employer now, which means I can’t speculate with you on her motives and decisions. If you want an answer to your question, you’ll have to ask her, not me.”

“Lord grant me patience, we’re back at this again. The problem is, I already know too much about this situation for you to back out now and expect me not to dig after you.”

“Do what you want. But you’ll be talking to yourself.”

“Thank you, I will.” The admiral relaxed back into her seat. “Explore possibilities, eh? We know that’s not the case, because she’s far too aware of the cost to Starfleet and the Federation if she continues to divert those funds. And she’s got a wife who is deeply invested in the Starfleet command structure; I’m sure she’s not going to want to jeopardize Janeway’s forward motion. So that’s a cover for something else. The question then becomes, what is she covering?”

Alison sipped her drink, listening in some admiration as her aunt picked the threads apart.

“Or maybe the question becomes, why is she delaying? She needs time before she commits. Because she needs the promise of that decision, doesn’t she? Besides her fortune, that promise is the biggest source of power in her hands. It’s leverage. So what is she leveraging?” She stared at a point above the viewscreen, deep in thought.

Alison was fascinated by the change in her body posture when she made the connection. Her head and shoulders shifted back, straightening her spine, and when their eyes met there was definitely a spark.

“Your boss is about to venture into political blackmail, isn’t she?”

“I told you, Aunt Alyynna. This isn’t something I can discuss.”

“Oh, for the love of God. I know what you’re not saying.” Aunt Alyynna dragged her fingers through her blonde hair, rumpling it up considerably. “Well, I just hope she’s learned a lot about negotiation from her wife, or she’s about to be eaten alive. She’s playing with the big dogs now.”
Alison picked up her glass and took a sip. She wished she could counter her aunt’s statement, but chances were pretty good that Lynne was about to be eaten alive. And she herself had a ringside seat to it; she’d made the appointment today.

The admiral suddenly smiled at her. “I wish I could be there. I have to hand it to her, that woman has ovaries of solid duranium.”

Alison couldn’t help her laugh. “Now on that topic, I can openly agree with you.”
The street looked like any other in Houston, a city that Tuvok found himself appreciating for its logical grid layout and its Vulcan-like weather. His companions didn’t seem to appreciate the heat quite as much as he did, judging by the sweat on their faces, but they were not about to complain. They were Starfleet security, trained to adapt to any environment.

“I am curious as to the July temperatures, given this level of warmth in February,” he mused as they strode down the sidewalk. “It might be a refreshing place to visit.”

“Refreshing?” Lieutenant Terrill, current Chief of Security for Voyager, looked over with a raised eyebrow. “With all due respect, Commander, ‘refreshing’ is a dip in a cold mountain lake. Houston in July is more like ‘debilitating’.”

“Not if you’re a Vulcan,” said Ensign Mulcahy. His Irish pale skin was currently closer in color to his hair, but he retained the cheery attitude that had not left him for a minute since being assigned to Tuvok’s team. “I hear Vulcans don’t think it’s warm enough until they can fry an egg on a rock.”

“A colorful but inaccurate metaphor, Ensign. It would be more accurate to say that we don’t consider it warm enough until we can fry an egg on a rock in the shade.”
Mulcahy grinned, but Terrill clearly wasn’t sure if his humor had been intentional or not. Tuvok stared straight ahead, allowing her to draw her own conclusion—which, by the easily readable expression on her face, was to the negative. “Then you’d probably love this place in July,” she said. “I don’t know how it compares to Vulcan, but I can tell you that it’s a lot like Cardassia.”

“You’ve been to Cardassia?” He was intrigued; she certainly hadn’t been posted there by Starfleet. And Cardassia was not known as a popular vacation planet.

“Yes, sir. I was part of the Bajoran Resistance. My entire team got wiped up. Most of them went to the camps, but some of us were sent to Cardassia as house servants.”

“No shit?” said Mulcahy. His face immediately turned even more red. “Sorry, sir. That just slipped out.”

“I presumed as much. I also presume that your vocabulary includes alternative means of expressing surprise.”

“Yes, sir.” Mulcahy faced forward again, and Tuvok turned his attention to Terrill.

“If I may ask, how long were you in service on Cardassia?”

“Six years. I was captured right before the Cardassians withdrew from Bajor. But they somehow forgot to return all of their captives.”

Though her tone was matter-of-fact, Tuvok understood a great deal that was not being said. “Your survival is impressive, Lieutenant. Bajoran servants had a very short life expectancy on Cardassia.”

“Yes, I know.” She offered nothing else.

“How did you escape?”

“The Battle of Cardassia. It was the best distraction anyone could have wished for.” She looked up, and he nodded at her to continue. “A number of us managed to make our way to the Federation forces who were fighting with the Cardassian Resistance. I went expecting to find Humans in charge. You could have knocked me over with a feather when I found one of my own people directing those Cardies.”

“Commander Kira Nerys.” He had read about the Dominion War as soon as the data files had reached Voyager. The Battle of Cardassia had been the turning point that ended the war, though not without enormous casualties. Eight hundred million Cardassian civilians had died in mere days. By contrast, the forty-one-year Cardassian occupation of Bajor had
resulted in the deaths of ten million Bajorans. Even the most revenge-minded Bajorans had given up their blood thirst after seeing the decimation of Cardassia.

“Yes. She’s the one who encouraged me to apply for Starfleet. She said the discipline required might help me channel my anger.”

“Clearly it has. You seem to be very centered.”

“That’s just taken a while to learn where the right targets are.”

He made a mental note to share this information with Captain Janeway, who had been less than impressed with the Lieutenant’s performance to date. There was more to Terrill than was contained in her Starfleet record. With more specialized training, she could be a very good security officer indeed. Anyone who could survive six years in captivity on Cardassia had great strength of body and will.

“There it is, sir,” offered Mulcahy, who appeared eager to make up for his prior lapse.

Tuvok followed his line of sight to the small shop tucked between two larger storefronts. The sign read “MODERN ANTIQUES,” an oxymoron that perfectly described the wares in its window displays.

An antique bell tinkled over the door as they entered, drawing the attention of the small, overweight man behind the counter.

“Hello, hello!” he said, smiling. “What can I do for you?”

“We’re interested in your work with microelectronics,” said Tuvok. The man nodded cheerfully.

“Certainly! I can put a personal communicator in anything, though as you can see, the antique watches are my best-selling product. A lot of professionals out there love the statement that a twenty-second century watch makes on their wrist, but they love the fact that they can actually use it as a comm unit even more. It looks sharp and it’s one less thing they have to carry around.”

“Actually we’re more interested in the products you don’t sell openly, Mr. Amberg. Such as microtransmitters for monitoring private conversations.”

Amberg’s smile fell. “I don’t mess with that kind of stuff. You want that, you need to find someone else to sell it to you.”

“I think not.” Tuvok pulled a small vial out of his pocket and held it up. “This is your work, I believe.”
There was a moment of silence before Amberg shook his head. “Never seen anything like it. You’ve got the wrong guy. Wish I could help you, but I don’t know anyone who works with those.”

“Mr. Amberg,” said Tuvok patiently, “we traced the components of this transmitter. It uses an unusually dense form of isolithium, which we tracked to a supply company on Mars. That company has records showing a shipment of isolithium to your store.”


Tuvok set the vial on the counter and pulled out his tricorder. “Red World Alloys uses an identifying molecular marker in its shipments, as required by the regulatory agency for intersystem alloy trade. We scanned your shop from orbit. The molecular signature from your remaining supplies of isolithium match the signature of the alloy in this transmitter. In addition,” he said as the readout popped up on his screen, “you have an active transmitter in this shop right now, operating on the same frequency as the one we found illegally placed in the office of a private citizen. I can understand why you’d want to record the conversations of your customers, given the type of people you deal with.”

Amberg looked around, no doubt weighing his chances for escape, but Mulcahy was blocking the front door and Terrill was poised at the edge of the counter, ready to vault it.

“Look,” he said, raising his hands, “I don’t want any trouble. I don’t know who you guys are, but—”

“Commander Tuvok, Starfleet Security.” He opened his vest to expose his commbadge. “That’s Ensign Mulcahy by the door, and Lieutenant Terrill there. And I am pleased to hear that you don’t want trouble. Your sensible attitude will make this very simple.”

Amberg’s eyes widened. “You’re Starfleet? What the hell does Starfleet want with me? Listen, okay, I sell transmitters, but not to non-Federation species and not to criminals.”

Tuvok lifted an eyebrow. “And how do you know that your clients are not criminals?”

“They’re just transmitters, all right? It’s not like I’m selling weaponry! Transmitters aren’t used for serious criminal activity. They’re just for listening, for gathering information. Small stuff. Nothing big.”
“That must be a comforting fabrication for you. In fact—” he indicated the vial—“this particular transmitter was used to enable a murder attempt. Would you call that ‘serious criminal activity’?”

Amberg’s mouth opened and shut again as he shook his head. “I’m not responsible for how they’re used. I just sell them. You can’t get me on an accessory charge and you know it.”

“You are correct. But I can file charges against you for conspiracy. Also for knowingly selling devices used for privacy violations of Federation citizens. I’m certain that a little more thought would result in additional charges.”

“You might check his accounts,” said Terrill. “Since the transmitter sales are clearly done in the back room, I’d guess he’s not paying his Federation percentage on those sales.”

“An excellent idea.”

Amberg looked back and forth between them, his eyes narrowing. “You don’t want to file charges. Otherwise you’d be doing it instead of talking about it. You want information.”

“Very astute, Mr. Amberg.” Perhaps this investigation was going to be easier than he’d thought.

“I can’t give out information on my clients. If I did that, I’d be out of business.”

Then again, perhaps not. Tuvok sighed. “Apparently you have not realized that you are already out of business. Your dealings in spy equipment are illegal, and they have ended as of this moment. However, Starfleet has an interest in your product. This transmitter is of a quality we haven’t matched. So we’re offering you a deal. Tell us what we want to know, and you can continue making transmitters—for Starfleet. This has the added advantage of keeping you out of the New Zealand penal colony. Or, you can go to the colony. These are your only two options.”

It didn’t take Amberg long to make his decision.

~

Kathryn stood in the central square of Starfleet Headquarters, looking up at the building she was about to enter. Somewhere in there, a panel of four admirals was waiting to continue the debriefing that had first begun with MIDAS array-enabled messages ten months ago. She
remembered how carefully she’d phrased some of her responses then, grateful that she’d had one day between each transfer of messages to fine-tune her answers. It had gone on for weeks, and she’d thought then that she was putting it behind her.

She’d been an idiot. Of course Starfleet was never going to let her get away with being able to control her own debriefing. That had been made abundantly clear the moment Necheyev had stepped aboard Voyager. And now, after two weeks of what she couldn’t exactly call vacation, she was going back in to have every difficult decision of the last seven years questioned.

“I guess I’m really home,” she said, and started up the stairs.

The lobby hadn’t changed much since the last time she’d been here, but the age of the officers certainly had. These kids didn’t look old enough to pilot a transport, let alone a starship. She felt like she’d stumbled into an Academy building by mistake. Maybe it was Cadet Day and they were from the Academy.

“Captain Janeway!”

She turned and found what appeared to be a twenty-year-old saluting her crisply. A twenty-year-old in full lieutenant’s pips. There went the Cadet Day theory.

“Welcome home, Captain! May I just say that it’s an honor.”

She acknowledged his salute and smiled. “Thank you, Lieutenant. It’s good to be back.”

His grin made him look even younger, and she cringed inside. God, she thought crankily, I’m a damned veteran.

She must have been saluted by fifteen more young officers before finally coming across someone who actually looked old enough to be wearing lieutenant commander’s pips. By the time she was escorted into the debriefing room, it was almost a relief to see the four admirals waiting for her. Paris gave her a welcoming smile, while beside him, Necheyev looked as stern as ever.

“Welcome back, Captain Janeway,” said Necheyev. “You remember Admiral Hayes and Admiral Finnegan.”

“Yes, of course. It’s good to see you both.” She shook hands with Hayes first, then smiled at Finnegan. “We were in a room just like this many years ago.”

He laughed. “I remember it well. Your very first review board after
your very first command. You were most displeased to learn that any part
of your performance could be improved on.”

“As I recall, I was mostly displeased with that arrogant Vulcan who
seemed to take a very un-Vulcanlike pleasure in noting my every lack,”
she said. “And even more displeased when I learned that he’d been
assigned as tactical officer on my next command.”

“So after all these years, Captain, are you ready to tell me I was right?”

Finnegan gave her a broad grin.

“I can’t even imagine what the last seven years would have been like
without Commander Tuvok,” she said. “And frankly I don’t think we’d
have survived without him. So yes, Admiral, I’m prepared to say it. You
were right.”

He clapped her on the back as they moved toward their chairs. “Well,
I’m glad you don’t hold it against me.”

“I trust you’ve had some time to relax since getting back.” Admiral
Hayes was a little more rotund than when she’d last seen him, and she
wasn’t sure what to think of the beard.

“Some time, yes,” she said.

Necheyev smiled thinly. “A very careful answer, Captain. Perhaps you’ll
find it easier to speak openly if I tell you that everyone at this table is
aware of the situation with your wife. Now that her identity is confirmed,
I thought it best to bring things into the open.”

“Simply shocking.” Finnegan shook his head. “Attempted assassination
for economic gain—truly, the Dominion War has cost us in more ways
than we can count. The catastrophic losses on all sides seems to have
cheapened the value of life and social order. We’ve had more violent crime
on Earth in the past five years than in the two decades before.”

“And the same thing is happening all over the Federation,” added
Hayes. “A few species—the Vulcans, the Betazoids, the Risans—seem to
be going along just as before. But many others are reporting the same
upswing we’ve experienced.”

“It’s not surprising,” said Paris. “The same thing has happened after
every large conflict in our recent history. It will swing back to normal
eventually.”

“Yes, with the passing of a generation,” said Finnegan.

Kathryn listened with interest. “Do you know, I hadn’t thought of that
—I mean, that the war might have changed our social fabric. It has been
rather surprising, I must admit. I told Lynne that crime of any kind was nearly unheard of on Earth in our time, and yet sometimes it feels like we never left the Delta Quadrant.” Kathryn still felt guilty about that. She’d told the truth, but circumstances had made it a lie.

“Compared to what Earth societies were like in her time, even these elevated levels are miniscule,” said Necheyev. “But I don’t imagine it feels that way when it’s directed at her.”

*When it’s directed at us, you mean.* Kathryn met her gaze and nodded. “No, it doesn’t. And it’s especially demoralizing after all we’ve gone through to get to this point. We’re home, but we still can’t let our guard down.”

“I’m sorry to tell you this, Captain, but none of us can let our guard down. We may have won the Dominion War, but the Federation still faces threats on all sides, the greatest of which is almost certainly the Borg. Which is why this debriefing is so important. Your discoveries and knowledge can be immensely helpful as we face our future.” Necheyev activated the holographic recorder and picked up right where she’d left off, the day *Voyager* had landed on Earth. “Let the record show that this debriefing is being attended by Admirals Necheyev, Paris, Hayes, and Finnegan, and Captain Janeway. The date is February fourth, twenty-three seventy-eight, stardate five five zero one three point six. Captain Janeway, will you please recount for us your experiences with Borg transwarp technology, beginning with your theft of a transwarp coil from a Borg ship?”

=Gretchen answered= the call on her FedComm unit and found her daughter looking back at her. “Kathryn! Are you done?”

“Not by a long shot.” Kathryn sighed. “Necheyev finally acknowledged the inconvenient Human requirement for food. Five hours of debriefings, and I’ve got half an hour to eat before we go back and start it again. Apparently everyone is having so much fun that they’ve decided to put off my public relations coaching until tomorrow. But I wanted to see how Lynne’s doing. Is she around?”

It was kind of cute the way she was so protective of Lynne. Not that Gretchen would ever say so. “Believe it or not, she’s out cleaning the barn. I’ll transfer your call.”
“Cleaning the—you put her to work? Mom, you said you’d hire Daniel MacGruder’s boys!”

“Calm down, it wasn’t my idea. She got bored. She said she needed to move.”

“Oh. Sorry.” A small smile transformed Kathryn’s tired face. “That does sound like her.”

“And Seven and Revi are out there with her. They seem to be as reluctant to leave her alone as you are.”

“Thank god for that. Knowing they’re there makes it easier to be here. Yes, would you transfer me?”

“No problem.” Gretchen reached for the button.

“Hey, Mom?”
She paused. “Yes?”

“Thanks for looking after her.”

Gretchen nodded. “Anytime. You know that.”

“I do.” Kathryn waited, and Gretchen hit the transfer button. She stood in the kitchen for a moment, looking out the window toward the barn. There had been something in Kathryn’s eyes when she’d said thank you, and it took a while to put a definition to it.

Solidarity. It was an acknowledgment that they were on the same team, working toward the same goal. A thank you not just for being there, but for being on her side.

Well, Edward, she thought, our Goldenbird is finally figuring it out. And all it took was seven years’ exile and marrying someone who got under her skin.

Humming, she picked up the book she’d been reading and headed for the living room. I wonder if Lynne knows about her childhood name? She’d never heard Lynne use it or mention it, and given how much that woman loved to tease, that had to mean she didn’t know.

A smile spread across her face as she sat in her favorite chair and opened her book.

I wonder how much Kathryn will give me not to tell her?

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“Okay, that’s it. We have to go.” Revi dusted off her hand, frowned at it, and tried rubbing it on her pants. That didn’t help either.

“Give it up,” said Lynne. “Besides, you’re going to shower anyway.
Right? Tell me you’re showering before subjecting that poor woman to your stinky selves.”

“Hey, the reason we’re stinky is because we’re out here helping you. A little gratitude would be appropriate.”

“Did I ask for that help? Seems to me like you two invited yourselves.”

Seven shoved the crate she’d just finished packing onto the top of the neat stack in the corner and dusted off her own hands. “Have you noticed that since Lynne became a Vice-Chair, things such as gratitude are now unworthy of her?”

“Come to think of it, I did notice that,” said Revi. “She leaves that sort of thing to the unwashed masses.”

Lynne grinned at them. “You said it, I didn’t. And you could fix that part about being unwashed. I’m afraid you’re stuck with the other part, though.”

“Come on, Seven. Let’s leave Her Greatness to the dust and the mice.”

Seven walked over to stand next to Lynne. “You’ll be all right?”

All levity vanished from Lynne’s expression. “I’ll be fine. Actually this is great therapy.” She looked around the old barn appreciatively. “It may not be made of wood, but it still feels like a barn. It’s…comfortable.”

Revi sneezed. “Great,” she said, rubbing her nose. “Dust makes you comfortable. Then you’re exactly where you should be. But we have to go to our own therapy.”

“Good luck,” said Lynne. “Don’t give the counselor too much trouble.”

“We won’t,” said Seven.

Revi caught her hand and smiled at her. “Yeah, this is just our first appointment.”

Lynne snorted. “See you on Voyager tonight, then.”

Kathryn stifled a sigh of relief when the aide came in to speak to Necheyev, forcing a break in the debriefing. Even the other admirals were looking tired. Paris gave her a wan smile as they waited, politely ignoring the whispered conversation at the other end of the table.

The aide straightened and left the room while Necheyev deactivated the holographic recorder. “We’ll pick this up again tomorrow,” she said.
“Captain Janeway, there’s been some progress in Commander Tuvok’s investigation. He’s waiting outside to fill us in.”

Kathryn’s ears perked up. Now this was more like it. The other admirals pushed their chairs back, standing up with a few stifled groans. Kathryn stood as well, shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries as they took their leave, and waiting with a smile as Tuvok entered. “Fancy meeting you here,” she said. “How was Houston?”

“A most agreeable city,” he said, nodding his greetings to them. “With very cooperative inhabitants.”

“So Mr. Amberg saw the light,” said Necheyev.

“It would be more accurate to say that he saw the benefits of cooperation. Not only that, but in the interests of self-preservation, he has been recording his customers for some time. We now have not only a voice print but also an image of the man who purchased that microtransmitter. The staff at Data Records are already running them through the system, and seem confident that we’ll have a match within the hour. Then it’s simply a matter of finding him. We’ve already shown the image to the transporter operator in Bloomington, who confirmed him as the man who had been asking about Captain Janeway.”

“Have those records been run through the Starfleet database yet?” Necheyev asked.

He nodded. “That was the first thing we did. He is not a member of Starfleet.”

Kathryn met Necheyev’s eye and saw her own relief mirrored there. “Thank god,” she said quietly, and Necheyev nodded.

“My sentiments exactly. That closes the door on a whole host of unpleasant possibilities. Then it must have been this man who accessed the Starfleet relay and downloaded the destination data for your beam-in to Voyager.”

“And if he has those kinds of engineering skills, then it wouldn’t have been hard for him to tap into the ski resort system to access our records there,” said Kathryn.

“Agreed,” said Tuvok. “This end of the investigation is coming together. But I now believe it’s the wrong end. The Cardassians almost certainly hired this Human assistant, but that still doesn’t tell us who hired them. For that, I’m convinced that the most viable thread of inquiry is inside the Hamilton Foundation.”
“I’m sure Alison will give you any assistance she can,” said Necheyev. “She’s been keeping her eyes open for quite some time now.”
“I’ve already spoken with her, and will be returning there tomorrow.”
“Excellent work, Tuvok,” said Kathryn. “Having you on the case is making me feel a lot more confident that we’ll get this mess wrapped up quickly.” With a start, she realized that she had probably just insulted Necheyev’s staff, and turned to see the admiral looking at her with a raised eyebrow. “Ah…I just meant that Commander Tuvok is an exemplary investigator,” she added lamely.

Necheyev stared for a moment longer before allowing a small smile on her face. “Not to worry, Captain. I’m in complete agreement with you regarding the Commander’s skills. However, I do think you might wish to acquaint yourself with the caliber of officers here at Headquarters, especially as you’ll likely be working with them in the future.”
“Okay, ma’am.” Kathryn accepted the rebuke with an internal twinge. Certainly she’d deserved it, but…damn, that stung. And in front of Tuvok, too.

“Is there anything else of note, Commander?” asked Necheyev.
Tuvok shook his head. “No, Admiral. I’ve recorded all the details in my report.” He pulled out two PADDs, handing one to Kathryn and the other to Necheyev. “I will update this daily.”
“Very good,” said Necheyev, accepting her PADD. “You’re dismissed.” As the door closed behind him, she looked back at Kathryn. “Dual reports for us. Nice touch.”

“Commander Tuvok is one of the most thorough officers I’ve ever known,” said Kathryn, who felt that was a safer response than, Yes, because I’m still his Captain even if you’re the nominal head of the investigation.
But Necheyev seemed to hear her unspoken words. “Your staff have an extremely high level of loyalty to you. Do you think that might affect their ability to reintegrate into the Starfleet structure?”
Kathryn straightened her spine and looked Necheyev in the eye. “They’re not just my staff, Admiral. They’re Starfleet.”

Necheyev nodded. “I’m glad to hear it. And don’t look so offended; that loyalty is a testament to your leadership.” She picked up her PADD from the table and tapped it. “Now that we’re done with today’s debriefing, I have a few other items that have been needing your attention. Quite a bit has been happening during your leave.”
Tell me about it, thought Kathryn darkly. But of course the admiral wasn’t referring to Lynne’s brushes with death.

“We have a…situation with the Doctor,” said Necheyev, still looking at her PADD.

That got Kathryn’s full attention. “There hasn’t been an issue with the ruling, has there?” Surely she’d have been notified if that were the case. One of the many last-minute items on her to-do list at Terellia had been making sure that the Doctor would be treated as an individual upon their return to Federation space. She’d been assured that the legal precedent set thirteen years earlier by Lieutenant Data’s case would apply to the Doctor as well—namely, that since he could not be categorically defined as non-sentient, he also could not be considered Starfleet property. The fight for an actual declaration of sentience would be a much larger issue, as she’d explained to him, but one that she was willing to back him on. In the meantime, he’d planned to stay with Lieutenant Barclay until the more immediate issues of where he might go and which career he might follow had been settled.

“No, the ruling stands,” Necheyev said. “He has no concerns that Starfleet will consider him its property. However, an issue has arisen regarding his mobile emitter, which is Starfleet property. Starfleet has requested its return, and he has refused. I’m sure you can see the potential for trouble here.”

Indeed she could, and she’d prepared for this long ago.

“Admiral, with all due respect, I think someone in the legal branch has overstepped their bounds. I listed that emitter on a Form G979 a year ago. The approved form was returned via MIDAS communication, and has been filed in both Voyager’s records and here at Headquarters.”

The Admiral stared in surprise. “You listed the emitter as a gift from a foreign dignitary? And somebody actually signed off on that?”

“Yes.”

“Who was that stupid?”

“I don’t recall who signed the form.” This was a lie, but she wasn’t about to say that Admiral Hayes was stupid. Though it was true that he probably hadn’t read her list as closely as he should have.

Necheyev shook her head. “Never mind, I’ll get a copy and see for myself. Tell me, Captain, is there anything else I should know about that’s been categorized as a gift? The Borg alcoves, maybe?”

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“No, ma’am. Those were categorized as souvenirs.”
Necheyev’s jaw actually went slack. “You are joking.”

“Not in the slightest. I picked them up in the course of Voyager’s travels. They had no impact on the operation of the ship or its mission, and though they did require ship’s power to function, so did any number of other electronic devices purchased, gifted, or otherwise acquired by the crew over the last seven years.”

“Those alcoves have tactical significance to Starfleet! Are you telling me that you paper-shuffled them right off your ship? And that someone here actually allowed that to happen?”

“The alcove technology has tactical significance, Admiral. Not the alcoves themselves. The blueprints for their design have already been filed in my reports. If Starfleet wishes, it can manufacture all the alcoves it wants. In fact I’m certain that Seven of Nine would lend her expertise to a short term project if it were needed. But I’m glad this topic has come up, because I was going to requisition the use of Starfleet resources to dismantle the alcoves and beam them to my mother’s farm. I’m sure you agree that it would be more efficient for Lynne, Seven and Revi to regenerate there than to do it on Voyager.” They’d done that the night after the second assassination attempt, when Revi had informed her that the three of them had gone as long as they could on the portable regenerator, and desperately needed a full recharge. The regenerator’s output was being severely taxed with all three women using it. With Necheyev’s approval they’d all gone to Voyager, where Kathryn had spent a sleepless night watching over them in the alcove unit, while an entire security team stood guard in the main cargo bay. They were scheduled to do the same thing tonight, since four days was the maximum that Revi was comfortable with. And Kathryn was devoutly hoping that this would be the last time.

Necheyev appeared to be momentarily speechless. When she finally spoke, her voice was solid ice.

“I’m sure that if I check the records, I’ll find this has all been properly filed and approved, won’t I?”

Kathryn braced herself. “Yes ma’am, you will.”

“And how exactly did you list the alcoves so that they flew under the radar?”

“They’re listed as medical technology used to recharge prosthetic
devices. Personally owned and operated by three members of the crew with prosthetics."

The room crackled with tension as Necheyev glared at her. Finally she said, “You have some nerve, Captain. I’ve more than half a mind to discipline you right now for flagrant abuse of Starfleet policy. The regulations exist for a reason, and for a captain to knowingly co-opt them sets a terrible example for everyone else. How are we supposed to enforce respect for regulations if our officers just brush them aside?”

Kathryn said nothing, waiting for the rest of it.

“But I’m also thinking that you’ve left yourself a way out, haven’t you? You said three members.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And there are four alcoves.”

“That’s correct.”

Necheyev shook her head. “You’re a perfect match for your wife.”

“Excuse me?” That threw her; she had no idea what Necheyev was talking about.

“Never mind. The point is that I can respect the difficult situation in which you found yourself, and the fact that you managed to work around it in such a way as to protect everyone’s interests. Three alcoves go home with you, and Starfleet keeps one alcove and the blueprints. As well as a promise that Seven of Nine will be available to consult on building additional units, do I have that right?”

“Yes ma’am, you do.” Kathryn was cautiously hopeful.

“Then you’ve won this round, Captain. And I’ll approve the use of Starfleet resources to remove three of the alcoves, because that will be cheaper in the long term than having an entire security team guarding Ms. Hamilton while her would-be killer is still unidentified. I’d rather that take place on your mother’s farm, where the Hamilton Foundation can absorb the cost of security.” She stepped closer, putting them almost nose-to-nose. “But understand that this sort of gamesmanship is not something I want to see again. You’re not on your own anymore. You’re part of a larger entity, with larger goals, and I expect you to work with Starfleet, not around it. And if you forget that again, I will come down on you so hard that you’ll wish you were still in the Delta Quadrant. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Abundantly.
“Good.” With that, Necheyev appeared to dismiss the whole thing and went back to her PADD. For the next half hour she fired off rapid questions, getting clarification and answers to issues that had come up in the last two weeks—especially in the ongoing fine-toothed combing of Voyager’s systems, which had been giving some of Starfleet’s top technicians more than a few fits.

By the time she was dismissed, Kathryn was more than ready to leave. As the office door closed behind her she took a deep breath, letting some of her tension dissipate on the exhale. She’d known that the alcoves were not going to be an easy sale, but she had a feeling she’d just burned up some of the goodwill between her and Necheyev.

Oh well. It had to be done. A sudden smile creased her face as she realized that tonight would indeed be her last night of standing guard in the cargo bay. Tomorrow Lynne, Seven and Revi could take care of the alcoves. Maybe B’Elanna would be willing to help. She might be stuck in debriefings, but at least they could get something useful done. And then there would be no more dependency on technology that Starfleet could, in all reality, have taken away from them.

As she trotted down the steps and made her way across the courtyard, she felt unexpectedly cheerful. It hadn’t been a bad job for her first day back at work.
“Welcome. I’m so glad you’ve come.” Counselor Deanna Troi beamed at them as they entered her office. “Please, have a seat wherever you’d like.”

Seven considered the options—an L-shaped sofa, a pair of soft armchairs, a set of harder chairs around a wooden table—and looked back at the counselor. “I’m familiar with this test. Our choice of chairs will tell you something about our states of mind, correct?”

Troi’s smile grew larger. “Perhaps with some types of counseling, and with some counselors. But I’m an empath; I have no need for little tests to know what you’re feeling. Besides, this isn’t my office. This is just a temporary space I’ve been granted for my work with Voyager’s crew.”

“Don’t try to analyze the analyst, darling,” said Revi. “It’ll just drive you mad.”

“I thought we were already mad, and that’s why we came.”

Troi laughed, a light, breezy sound. She seemed genuinely happy to see them, which puzzled Seven.

“I suppose the Collective wouldn’t have considered the concept of counseling worth the space it took to store the data,” she said. “If all you know of it is what you’ve read, then you might have a few misconceptions. I’m not here to assign some mental pathology to you. I’m here to
listen. I hope that you’ll eventually be comfortable enough with me to let me do that.”

“Seven’s just shy,” said Revi, striding over to the couch and plopping onto it. “You wouldn’t know it to look at her, but it’s true.”

“Revi is shifting her own characteristics onto me,” countered Seven as she walked over to join her partner. “She’s the reserved one.”

“Except when I’m not.”

Troi sat gracefully on the other couch section, crossing her legs as she faced them. “You two are quite a team.”

Seven felt her hand grasped and squeezed. “Yes, we are,” she said, smiling at Revi.

Tilting her head, Troi said, “I don’t often counsel couples. There aren’t that many on a starship to begin with, and even when there are, the social dynamics of ship culture mean that guarding privacy is even more important than in a normal society. So it’s usually the stable, committed couples who come to me. And they’ve usually been together for years in order to achieve that stability. I’ve familiarized myself with your files; you can’t have been together for long. Yet I sense a connection between you that seems much older and deeper than the data would indicate.”

Seven was pleased to hear a professional counselor confirm what she had always thought to be true. “I have no prior experience with romantic relationships,” she said, “but there has never been a doubt in my mind that my first will also be my last.”

Revi winced slightly. “I have to admit to more doubt than Seven, which has been a problem for us in the past. But Counselor, we’re not here for couples counseling. We just came together because I didn’t want to come alone.”

“And because Kathryn encouraged me to come,” added Seven.

“Kathryn. Do you mean Captain Janeway?”

“Yes,” they said in unison, and she chuckled.

“I’m probably going to have to get used to that,” she said. “Your emotions are intertwined as well. Is that a Borg influence?”

“Not an influence,” said Revi. “A gift.”

“We have an intact Borg interlink,” Seven clarified.

“Fascinating. And how extremely valuable that must be in your relationship.”
They smiled at each other and then at Troi. “Thanks for being so accepting of it,” said Revi.

Troi lifted a hand. “It’s a part of you. There’s nothing to accept. Though it’s going to be a bit of a challenge for me—at the moment I’m not sure which of you is generating which emotions. But I think I’ll be able to work through that in time, as I get to know you. Now, if I may... you referred to Captain Janeway as Kathryn. It sounds as if you’ve moved past the professional boundary with her.”

“She is our friend,” said Seven proudly.

“She’s the best friend I’ve ever had.” Revi’s voice was matter-of-fact, but Seven felt the emotions packed around the statement. Judging by the look on Troi’s face, she had as well.

“Those are strong words,” she said.

“And not ones I’d say lightly. Kathryn picked me up when I was at rock bottom. She gave me hope when I’d given up on the concept.”

“She could have done that as a caring captain.”

Revi smiled. “She could have. And I think at first she did, just the same as she did with Seven. But somewhere along the line she offered her friendship as well.”

“It’s a true gift, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. And it’s one I cherish.”

Troi gazed at her for a moment, then looked at Seven. “I apologize for making an assumption about why you’re here. Perhaps you can tell me what you hope to get out of our time together.”

Seven didn’t know how to answer that. “I’m here because Kathryn said that I should come.”

“Is that the only reason? Isn’t there anything you want?”

Weren’t counselors supposed to know these things? “I don’t know,” she said. “I have no experience with professional counseling. What should I want?”

Troi’s smile was kind. “Remember when I said I wasn’t here to assign a mental pathology to you?”

“Of course.”

“Well, I’m not here to tell you what you should want, either. Counseling isn’t like other areas of Starfleet. There’s no expected behavior or performance.”
Seven frowned. “Then how am I supposed to know if I’m doing it right?”

Revi’s amusement swept through her even as her partner laughed out loud. “I’m sorry,” she said, chuckling. “Gods, but you’re cute when you’re overachieving.”

Seven looked back at Troi, waiting for her expression to turn patronizing. To her surprise, the kindness in Troi’s face was unchanged.

“There is no right in this, Seven. There’s only what you want, and how I can help you with that. But I do need a starting place. I can’t help you until I know where to begin.”

“But I didn’t come because I wanted to. I came because Kathryn asked me to, and then Revi said she wanted to come see you and asked me to come with her.”

“We did talk her into it,” said Revi.

“I see,” said Troi. “So you’re here strictly as a support for Revi, and to satisfy a request from Captain Janeway, and not for any reasons of your own.”

“Yes.” But that didn’t quite feel right. She looked at Revi for help.

: Maybe you should tell her why Kathryn asked you to come. :

But before Seven could open her mouth, Troi was saying, “Let me tell you what I learned from your file. I learned that you have been disciplined on several occasions for defying orders from your captain and for acting without authorization, and that the last such occasion was just seven weeks ago when you went to the Terellian Gifting in Captain Janeway’s place. I also learned that when you have acted against authority, it has almost always been because you were strongly convinced that your actions were in the best interests of your crewmates or someone you cared for.”

She leaned forward. “You don’t strike me as the kind of person who simply gets talked into things. You think things through and then you take action, usually with the motive of upholding the best interests of others, and rarely with your own benefit in mind. Would that be a fair assessment of your normal decision-making process?”

Seven stared. Troi’s calm and welcoming persona had hidden an intelligence and forthright manner that she hadn’t expected. This was the sort of thing Kathryn would say to her when they were having a ‘philosophical discussion,’ and Seven felt a surge of anticipation at the possibility of
another intellect who could challenge her, someone else she could learn from.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s a fair assessment. As a Borg I always acted for the best interests of the Collective. As a Human, I…tend to have the same motivation.” She remembered their discussion while sitting in Kathryn’s favorite willow tree, and smiled slightly. “The only thing that has changed is the nature of my collective.”

“Which became the crew of Voyager.”

“Initially. And to a certain extent that remained true until we landed here. But recently I have redefined my collective as consisting of my friends and family.”

Troi nodded. “Then let me rephrase my original question. Are you here because you personally hope to benefit from our talks, or because you feel your presence here is in the best interests of your current collective?”

After a moment of thought, Seven answered, “Both. I want to do anything I can to ease Kathryn’s concerns about me, and to help Revi.”

“I can see how that would be in their interests. But how does it benefit you?”

“I love them,” she said simply. “I feel better if they do.”

Troi sat back in her seat, examining her with the black eyes that were characteristic of her species. “All right. If you don’t mind, I’d like to break this down into the two halves you’ve given me. Let’s talk about the interests of your loved ones first. What exactly are Captain Janeway’s concerns about you?”

Revi squeezed Seven’s hand. : There you go. :

“You were at the party on the Enterprise,” said Seven, and Troi nodded. “So you must have seen the altercation between Lieutenant Maris and me.”

“From a distance. It did stop everything in the room.”

“Maris threatened Revi and hurt B’Elanna—Lieutenant Torres,” she clarified, seeing Troi’s forehead wrinkle.

“Of course. Thank you.” Troi gestured for her to continue.

Seven took a deep breath. “When she struck B’Elanna, I wanted to kill her.” She waited for Troi’s reaction.

“Okay. Then what?”

Taken aback by the counselor’s calm acceptance, Seven stumbled a bit. “I...reached out for her, because I was going to crush her throat, but
Lynne came between us. Other than Revi, she’s the only person who could have physically stopped me.”

“You’re speaking of Lynne Hamilton? Captain Janeway’s wife?”

“Yes. She held me back until Kathryn got there and ordered me to stand down. That was when I was able to control my anger. But Kathryn was worried about my violent reaction. She told me that she understood my protective instincts, but that if they got out of control, they could harm both me and Revi.” For herself, she hadn’t been concerned. But for Revi...

She looked at her partner in surprise, then back at Troi. “That’s what I want,” she said. “I want to make certain that I won’t hurt Revi.”

Revi’s own surprise tingled through her. “What? That wasn’t what this was about.”

“Yes, it is. Kathryn said that if I didn’t learn to control those instincts, I could easily do something that I might regret later, and that it wouldn’t just be me paying the price, but you too. I don’t ever want you to pay a price for being with me.”

: Darling...you’re the only one who’s paid so far. :

Seven shook her head, just as Troi said, “That’s an understandable sentiment, and it does you great credit as a partner. But it’s not realistic. All partnerships involve sacrifice of one kind or another, on both sides. There is always a price to be paid. But what I’m hearing is that you want to limit the potential of that cost by learning to control your reaction to a powerful impulse.”

“Yes.” Seven appreciated that the counselor could put an emotional concept into a logical frame. “That’s exactly it.”

Troi nodded. “And that’s a very achievable goal. I think the first thing we need to establish is that the impulse you felt—to protect your loved ones—is completely normal. You can’t control your instincts, Seven. They’re natural and powerful and they exist for very good reasons. What you can control is how you react to them and how you allow them to affect your actions. Emotions can’t be changed. They simply are. But we are all able to choose how we allow our emotions to direct us. For you, I suspect it will be merely a matter of teaching you a few tricks to use. And I have no doubt that you’ll pick them up quickly.”

Seven stared, the realization washing over her with a suddenness that
had her clutching Revi’s hand. “How long will you be available to talk to us?”

“My medical exchange is for ninety days. Why?”

“Because I just realized why Kathryn always said she wished she had a counselor on board.” Seven smiled, almost giddy with the knowledge. “You’re what she was talking about. You are the resource I’ve been missing all this time. You can teach me what I need to know about being more Human and less Borg.”

“And is that for the benefit of your collective?”

“No.” For the first time in their interview, Seven felt completely confident that this was the right answer. “It’s for me.”

“In that case,” said Troi with a brilliant smile, “we can get cooking on that right away.”

Revi was looking back and forth between them. “Wow. That was something to feel.”

“It was,” agreed Troi. “And I think I’m starting to get a sense for your emotional individuality. Revi, what are you hoping to gain from our sessions?”

“A little peace of mind.” Seeing Troi’s brow furrow, Revi said, “If you’ve read our files, then you know I was in the Borg Collective for three years. And I’ve read your file, Counselor Troi. I know you were the counselor on board the Enterprise when Captain Picard was assimilated. So you know precisely how much damage assimilation does to a person.”

“Yes,” said Troi quietly. “I do.”

“Then take the damage a few days caused a strong man like Captain Picard, and multiply it by whatever factor you like to imagine what it could do to someone less strong, over a much longer period. That will give you an idea of what a mess I am.”

Troi tilted her head again, assessing Revi with a frank gaze. “I do have some ideas,” she said. “For one thing, I know for a fact that you’re far stronger than you give yourself credit for. Captain Picard himself would be the first to tell you that he’s in awe of your survival and recovery, and how you managed to adapt after such a long period of assimilation. He was extremely impressed by you at the party on the Enterprise, and told me that if you were available he’d snatch you up and count himself fortunate for the opportunity.”

Revi looked away, embarrassed.
“And,” continued Troi, “I have an idea that a large part of the mess you say you are comes from a poorly developed sense of self-worth that dates back to long before your assimilation.”

That brought Revi’s eyes up, and Seven felt her surprise zing through both of them. But her voice was calm as she said, “I might not have been a poster child for emotional perfection before Wolf 359, but neither was anyone else I knew. I was normal. I’m not now. The Borg fucked me up and fucked me over, and that’s what I need to deal with.”

Troi nodded. “Yes, it is. And we will. But the Borg didn’t create your lack of self-esteem. They just made it much worse.”

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“Hey, welcome back,” said Lynne as Seven and Revi walked into Voyager’s mess hall. She and Kathryn were already relaxing at a table by one of the large viewports. “How’d it go?”

“Okay,” said Revi.

“Very well!” Seven said with a bright smile.

Kathryn looked between them. “Well, that’s not quite the reaction I was expecting.”

“Counselor Troi is extremely knowledgeable in her field,” said Seven, taking a seat across from her. “She says that teaching me about my humanity is not only feasible but probably much less difficult than I thought, because I’ve made so much progress already.”

Kathryn couldn’t help but smile back at her. Seven was practically glowing with pride and excitement, and it was impossible to resist. “Sounds like you and Counselor Troi really hit it off.”

Revi pulled out the chair next to Seven and sat down. “Hit it off? I think Troi wanted to take Seven home with her.”

“Revi is exaggerating, as usual.”

Lynne reached across the table and patted Revi’s hand. “See, I told you that you should have taken a shower first. If you had, maybe Troi would have wanted you, too.”

“Fuck off, Hamilton. See if I ever help you with your dirty work again.” But Revi’s tone didn’t match her words. To Kathryn’s eyes, she seemed more tired than anything else.

“Was it difficult?” she asked quietly.
Revi slumped back in her chair and sighed. “No, it’s just the same old stuff. Except worse.”

“Worse?” Now Lynne was outraged. “She made it worse?”

That got a chuckle. “First you insult me and now you’re all up in arms about what someone else did?”

“You’re my friend. That means I get to mess with you. Sometimes,” Lynne amended. “But not everyone has that right.”

“Calm down, she didn’t mess with me. She just...saw too damn clearly.”

“Isn’t that her job?” asked Kathryn.

“Yeah. I guess I forgot that counselors are as hard to bullshit about mental issues as doctors are to bullshit about physical issues.”

“Wait.” Lynne frowned. “Why were you trying to bullshit her?”

“She wasn’t,” said Seven. “She was bullshitting herself. Counselor Troi merely saw through it.”

Kathryn stared at Seven, then at Revi. “And now you’ve taught her this word?”

“It wasn’t me!” Revi pointed across the table. “Who on this crew loves that word the most, hm?”

Lynne silently pointed at Kathryn, and Revi snorted with laughter.

“I believe I’ve picked up that particular word from all of you.” Seven kept her expression admirably straight. “And my vocabulary is much the richer for it. Appropriate use of profanity is an important aspect of my reintegration into Human culture.”

“But not a part Counselor Troi will have to help you with,” said Lynne. “I think we’ve got that one covered.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Revi said. “And a good thing, too. I really don’t see Troi as the swearing type.”

“No, I don’t either,” said Kathryn. “But then, I don’t know her personally. There may be a big gap between her professional persona and her private one.”

Revi just looked at her, a tiny smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “At any rate,” she said, “I went in there hoping for some help with my Borg past and got slapped with a reminder that I have more than that to work on. It was kind of like reporting for a normal duty shift and being told that it had just turned into a triple.”

Kathryn made a mental note to thank Troi the next chance she got.
This was exactly what Revi needed, and something she had never been able to touch on her own. “Yes, but when that duty shift is over, I’ll bet you sleep like a rock,” she said.

Revi’s expression shifted. “I hope so. I really do.” She turned to Lynne. “So, no trouble getting here?”

“Would you believe that Kathryn came to get me? As if I couldn’t stand in Gretchen’s living room and get beamed over all by myself.”

“I’m taking no chances.” Kathryn leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. “Besides, you’re a very important person these days. You need an escort.”

Lynne rolled her eyes. “How times have changed, eh? First I was the security escort, and now I need one of my own.”

“Well, I’m not so worried about potential assassins,” said Kathryn, lying through her teeth. “I’m more worried about the throngs of people who now think you’re the story of the century. Necheyev said that the main Starfleet comm channel was flooded with requests about you today; apparently that FedComm report made a huge impression. See, I told you—I’m about to become Lynne Hamilton’s wife.”

“I don’t think you’ve got much to worry about, Captain Let’s Start The Parade.”

Kathryn groaned. “Don’t remind me.”

“So when is the first parade?” asked Revi.

“The day after tomorrow.” She brightened. “Want to come? I’m sure the organizers would love to have two ex-Borg and the famous Lynne Hamilton along.”

“No,” said all three of them in unison.

Kathryn slumped in her chair. “That’s what I thought.”
Alison dropped the PADD on her desk and ran a hand through her hair. “God, this is a pain,” she muttered. For the fourth night in a row, she was staying late at the office in an attempt to get a handle on her new duties as fund manager for Lynne’s trust. That woman simply had no idea what she had asked of her. These holdings were vast, and while she had no trouble understanding the various reports she was now going through, pulling them all together into a big picture was proving to be challenging. The overall database she’d made had gotten too big to allow for easy visuals, so this evening she’d given up on it and begun creating a three-dimensional chart with her holoprojector. As the relationships between the various holdings began to take shape, even the 3D chart was growing too complicated for her tastes. There just didn’t seem to be a way to break all of this down into a picture that she could grasp.

Which was ridiculous, because really, Lynne’s holdings weren’t any more complicated than those of the Hamilton Foundation.

Yes, except you’ve had seven years to soak up all the details of the Foundation’s trust and budget.

She sighed. It was already nine o’clock and she hadn’t had dinner yet. Nor was she in the mood for yet another replicated meal from her office dispenser.
Making the decision in an instant, she stood up, pulled on her jacket, and walked out. So far as she could tell, she was the only person left in the building besides cleaning and security staff. Not surprising; they were in the middle of the financial quarter and hadn’t yet hit the crunch time that end-of-quarter reports created. During those weeks, midnight could come and go but one would never know it by the numbers of people still at their desks.

“Hi, Ben,” she said as she reached one of the cleaning staff. “How are you?”

“Evening, Dr. Necheyev.” Ben was quite a bit taller than she, and as thin as a reed. “I’m good, thanks. You finally going home?”

“No, I’m just craving Thai food. And not from a replicator.”

He grinned. “That is an advantage of working downtown. I had dinner at Guo Gao’s before starting my shift.”

“Oh, ow.” Alison gripped her stomach, which had actually contracted as Ben had pronounced the name of her favorite Thai restaurant. “God, that sounds good. Keep the lights on for me, will you?”

“Sure thing. You want me to clean your office while you’re gone?”

“No thanks, I still have things scattered all over. I’ll be back in a few minutes with a big white bag.”

Giving her a teasing look, he said, “Try not to open it until you get back.”

Her stomach growled loudly as she stood in the silent lift. “I know,” she told it. “He just had to go and say it out loud, didn’t he?” Pulling her comm unit out of her pocket, she spoke the name of the restaurant and waited. “Yes,” she said a moment later, “I’d like to order a chicken pad thai, medium hot.”

The walk to Guo Gao’s cleared her mind, and by the time she arrived her meal was waiting for her. It was near torture walking back with the smells wafting from her stasis bag, but she consoled herself with happy thoughts of digging into it in the comfort of her office. The ride back up the lift was particularly difficult as heavenly odors filled the small space.

When the doors opened on the top floor, Ben was standing in front of them with his cart. “Whoo,” he exclaimed as she stepped out. “That smells fantastic. If I hadn’t already eaten I’d be passing out right about now.”
“I’m close to it. Don’t get in my way.”

He laughed as he pushed his cart into the lift. “Well, I’m off to the fourteenth. Have a good night, Dr. Necheyev. Don’t stay too late.”

“I won’t.” She smiled at him and then made her way down the quiet hall to her office. Her hand was nearly on the touch pad when she heard a soft noise from inside.

She froze. *What the hell?*

In an instant the silence of the empty floor shifted from comforting to threatening, and she backed a step away, staring at her door with wide eyes. Somebody was in there. And it wasn’t Ben, the only person in this entire building who had any reason to be there. Ben, who had clearly been unaware of anything wrong on the fifteenth floor…but then, he’d been cleaning offices. It would have been simple for someone to walk right past whichever office he’d been cleaning without him being any the wiser.

She thought of the microtransmitter and wondered if someone was replacing it. But why? There wasn’t any point any more.

Another sound floated out from behind the door—the quiet but unmistakeable scrape of one of her desk drawers being opened. As Alison pictured someone leaning over her desk, going through her things, her fear suddenly gave way to anger. She’d had just about enough of this. That was her office, goddammit, and she was tired of it being used as some sort of operations center for hurting other people.

Carefully she walked back down the hall and around the corner, then stopped and set her bag on the floor. Pulling out her comm unit, she called a FedComm number she had programmed in just a few days ago.

“This is Commander Tuvok,” came the calm voice. “Is there anything wrong, Dr. Necheyev?”

“Commander,” she whispered. “There’s someone inside my office, looking around.”

“Are you safe?” he asked instantly.

“I’m just outside the office. Whoever it is, they don’t know I’m here. But there’s nobody else on this floor right now.”

“I will be there in five minutes. Do not allow yourself to be seen or heard. Do you understand?”

“I understand. Hurry.”

“Tuvok out.”

She stood uncertainly in the hall, the silence pressing on her. Part of
her wanted just to get the hell off this floor, to go to the lobby and stand behind one of the potted palms until Tuvok arrived, but another part wouldn’t allow her to leave. What if Tuvok got here too late and whoever this person was finished up his business and simply walked out? Then she’d never know who had been violating her privacy—again. At the very least, she could find a place to hide where she could see what was happening.

She stepped to the first door in the hall and tried the keypad. Locked. She went to the second. Locked.

Shit! Ben’s already left, she realized. When he was done cleaning each office for the night, he locked it behind him. The only office on this entire floor that she could get into right now was her own.

The sound of a door sliding open sent a chill down her spine, and for a moment she couldn’t move at all. That was my door.

There was nowhere she could go. She was in a long hallway, with transparent aluminum on one side and locked office doors on the other. If she started running right now, she’d still be in sight when the intruder came around the corner. She turned, staring in fear at the corner behind her.

Her takeaway bag still sat on the floor.

Desperation gave her courage, and she crept back, quietly picking up the bag and holding it as tightly as she could. The intruder’s footsteps were light and unhurried. Whoever this was felt no sense of urgency, and with that realization her anger surged back. She stood, trembling with anticipation, as the footsteps drew nearer. Then she saw a flash of cloth and swung with all her strength, aiming high.

The impact exploded the stasis bag, sending chicken pad thai everywhere. A scream shattered the silence, and Alison watched in shocked astonishment as the intruder crashed to the floor. An intruder in a very expensive, well-cut suit, with shoulder length, glossy black hair.

Elise Hamilton stared up at her, holding one hand to her nose and the other out in front of her. “No!” she gasped. “No, please don’t. Don’t hurt me.”

Alison was so stunned that she momentarily forgot how to speak. At last she managed, “Me? Hurt you? You’re the one hiring assassins, for God’s sake!”

“What?!” Elise’s gray eyes were dazed. “Are you insane? You must be!
Oh, God…” Her voice trailed off as she looked at Alison in pure terror. “I won’t tell anyone. Just please—let me go. Please. I promise.” Blood was trickling out from under the hand she held over her nose.

Alison heard the lift doors open behind her, but she wasn’t about to look away from Elise, lying on the hall floor and still holding out her hand in a pleading gesture.

“Dr. Necheyev, step away,” said Commander Tuvok, coming up beside her. Elise’s eyes grew even wider as she took in the phaser pointed at her.

“Fuck!” She dropped both hands to the floor and tried to scramble backwards, but came up against the opposite wall. Her face was a bloody mess where her hand had been covering her nose and mouth.

“Don’t move another muscle, Ms. Hamilton, or I will stun you,” said Tuvok.

“I didn’t do anything!” Tears were rolling down her face now, mixing with the blood. “Jesus fucking Christ!”

“Dr. Necheyev, are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Commander. Thanks for getting here so quickly.” Belatedly, Alison realized that she was still holding onto the shattered remnants of her stasis bag. With a grimace, she dropped it on the floor. “If you didn’t do anything, then what in the name of God were you doing in my office?”

Elise looked from her to Tuvok and back again. “I…I was looking…for evidence.”

Alison frowned. “Evidence of what?”

But Elise seemed to be beyond answering, and her obvious fear finally got through Alison’s own shock. “Commander, I think there’s been a mistake,” she said.

He was already holstering his phaser, apparently having come to the same conclusion. “Ms. Hamilton,” he said, holding out his hand. “If you’ll come with me, please.”

She stared at his hand for several long moments before accepting it and allowing herself to be pulled up. “Oh fuck,” she gasped, covering her nose again. “That hurt.” She coughed, and Alison winced at the sound of it.

“Lean your head forward,” said Tuvok. “It will make breathing easier and keep the blood out of your throat.”

“Did I break it?” Alison was a little horrified at herself.
Tuvok looked around at the remnants of Alison’s dinner, then at the broken bag on the floor. His eyebrow twitched up. “No. She has capillary damage, but I believe her cartilage is intact. The nasal capillaries in Humans tend to bleed excessively when ruptured. Do you have a first aid kit nearby?”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Alison raced down the hall to the lift, where the first aid kit sat in its wall recess. Grabbing the box off its hook, she hurried back, arriving at her office just as Tuvok was helping Elise through the door. He directed her to the couch, where she slumped onto the cushions, her head hanging down. Alison set the kit on her conference table, pulled out the regenerator, and handed it to Tuvok.

“Thank you. Ms. Hamilton, please lift your head. This will not hurt.”

As he began running the regenerator over her nose, Elise took in a great gulp of air, still stunned and afraid but trying to control it. Alison couldn’t tear her eyes away from the sight. She’d never seen Elise looking anything but elegant. In a way, seeing her reduced to this was as shocking as knowing that she was the one who’d broken into her office.

A moment later Elise turned her head in response to a quiet request from Tuvok, and their eyes met. The expression she saw finally jolted Alison into action, and by the time Tuvok was finished, she was standing in front of Elise with a hand towel soaked in cold water. Silently Elise took the cloth and wiped her face, grimacing at the blood that swiftly turned it pink. She folded it and wiped again and again, until Alison put a hand on her wrist. “You’ve got it all,” she said.

Elise nodded, rubbed her hands clean on the towel and handed it back. Alison tossed it onto the conference table and dragged a chair over to sit in front of the couch. “You said you were looking for evidence,” she said. “Against me?”

After a silence so pronounced that Alison began to believe she wouldn’t answer, Elise finally said, “Yes. I was convinced it was you. But I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“Ms. Hamilton,” said Tuvok, “I told you and the other board members yesterday that Dr. Necheyev was not a suspect. Why did you persist in your conviction?”

“Because you didn’t seem to see what was right in front of you,” she said. “She was the only person who knew where Lynne and Captain
Janeway were, and when assassins showed up out of the blue, a micro-
transmitter was magically found in this office. What a perfect way to
throw off blame. And then she ends up as the only person Lynne trusts,
and suddenly gets a promotion to sole fund manager. I just couldn’t
believe that you didn’t see how it all added up. And to top it all off, Lynne
tells us that she’ll reconsider her decision to fire us if we come up with
the real killer. So I decided to come in here and look around, to see if I
could find something.”

“And did you?” asked Alison coldly. Her nascent sympathy for Elise
had evaporated; she’d had just about enough of people suspecting her.

“Just the evidence of you trying to figure out the Hamilton trust fund
holdings.” Elise indicated the holoprojector, and something in Alison
snapped.

“Five days ago I had Lynne breathing fire in my face for the same damn
suspicion,” she said, not even trying to tamp down her anger. “Except she
had much better reasons, and when we found the microtransmitter she
had the grace to apologize to me. Now I’m sure it’ll be a cold day in hell
before you show the same grace, but I am sick and tired of being every-
one’s scapegoat. I have busted my ass for over a year now, trying to make
sure that Voyager came home safely and that no harm came to Lynne. And
just where the hell have you been all that time, hm? She is your family,
and you’ve done nothing to help her! Oh, except to break into my o
ffi
ce.
And did you do that for her? No, you did it to save your damn job!” She
looked Elise up and down with total contempt. “If this is what wealth
does to people, then I thank God I was raised a di
fferent
way.”

Elise stared at her in shock, and Tuvok stepped in.

“Ms. Hamilton, I believe you’ve underestimated this investigation.
Perhaps you’ve had prior experience with law enforcement that gave you
reason to doubt the competence of investigators, but I assure you that I
have been as diligent as possible. Of course I saw the same connections
you did. But I also knew that Dr. Necheyev was responsible for saving
Voyager from destruction in the Delta Quadrant. That gave me a different
frame through which to view her. You have not had this information, and
without it, you’ve drawn an inaccurate conclusion regarding her
character.”

“What do you mean, she saved Voyager?” Elise’s eyebrows were
contracted in disbelief.
Tuvok looked at Alison, who really wasn’t in the mood to explain. But he seemed to think it was her story, so she sighed and said, “Back when you first told me about Lynne’s existence, I suspected that the threat she posed to the status quo might be too much for someone. So I did a little maneuvering to make sure that every report coming out of the Foundation got thoroughly examined by Starfleet engineers before it was passed on to Voyager. One of those engineers found something in the slipstream drive report that didn’t quite wash. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he’s a brilliant engineer, and I trusted his instincts. So did my aunt. So she gave Captain Janeway a big hint about it. Of course she couldn’t come right out and say anything, because an admiral doesn’t say the word ‘sabotage’ without a shipload of evidence behind her, especially not when it concerns some of the most powerful people in the Federation. But Captain Janeway got the message. She put her own staff to dissecting that report. And they found nothing. So they built the drive, and it was only when they had a physical drive built and could begin testing it that they discovered the problem. There was a zero point four two phase variance in the slipstream threshold.”

“I’m not a physicist,” said Elise. “I don’t know what that means.”

“What it means,” said Tuvok, “is that if we had used that drive, Voyager would not have been able to maintain its place in the slipstream corridor. It would have been thrown out into normal space at slipstream speeds. The probability of total destruction was one hundred percent. Even with the best contingency plan we could think of to counter the variance, we estimated our survival at less than fifteen percent.”

Elise gaped at them. “Wait a minute. Are you telling me that someone in the Foundation tried to sabotage Voyager?”

“That’s exactly what we’re telling you,” said Alison.

“But…that ship had one hundred and forty-eight people on it!”

“Yes,” said Tuvok calmly. “And someone was willing to kill every one of us to prevent Lynne Hamilton from coming home.”

“Oh, my God,” Elise said, looking from one to the other. “I…I had no idea.”

“Welcome to the real world,” said Alison. “Where people are willing to kill for money. Shocking, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t know. Shit, I feel like an absolute idiot. You’ve been dealing with this for a year?”
“Fourteen months, actually.”

Elise shook her head. “It’s like a holonovel come to life. I just can’t believe it. But…why didn’t you ever say anything? We could have helped you!”

“You must be joking,” Alison said. “You’re one of the top three suspects.” Except she wasn’t, not anymore. Elise had been genuinely terrified of her, and the killer would have known better. But she was just pissed off enough to be a little unkind.

Elise opened her mouth, then shut it again as she rested her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands. “What a fucking nightmare,” she mumbled.

“Yes, well you’ve just discovered the nightmare,” said Alison. “Some people have been living in it for a long time now. A few minutes ago you really thought I was going to kill you, didn’t you?”

Elise nodded, her head still in her hands.

“So now you have a glimpse of how Lynne feels. She survived two attempts on her life, by professional assassins. Not little smacks in the face, but assassins with deadly neurotoxins and phaser rifles. In addition to the sabotage. And she still had the guts to walk in that conference room and face all of you.”

She had more to say, but when Elise looked up she forgot her anger. There was true horror in those light gray eyes, and Alison finally cooled down enough to recognize it. For the first time, it occurred to her that perhaps Elise wasn’t as selfish as she appeared. She’d simply had no idea of the reality.

“Ms. Hamilton,” said Tuvok, “if you are indeed concerned with finding the person responsible for the attacks on Lynne, then perhaps you can help me with this.” He pulled a PADD from his hip pouch, activated it, and held it out. “Do you recognize this man?”

Elise took the PADD, frowned over it for several seconds, then shook her head and handed it back. “I’ve never seen him before. Or heard of him.”

Tuvok offered the PADD to Alison, who willed herself to find something familiar in the features of the man who stared out from the screen. Jefferson Wiler, aged thirty-one, and below that data was a list of half a dozen aliases. Had she seen him around the Foundation? On her way to a
restaurant downtown? At any of the social events she’d attended in the last few weeks?

“No,” she said regretfully. “I don’t recognize him either.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Tuvok, “but it would have been a good lead if either of you had. Mr. Wiler bought the microtransmitter that was found in your office. He also tracked Ms. Hamilton’s movements to Voyager nine days ago, and I’m confident that when I hear back from the security staff at the Silverton ski resort, I’ll find that he was there as well.”

“So he’s their Human contact.”

“I believe so. We have a Federation-wide alert on him now. Unless he’s hiding in a cave on one of the outer colonies, we’re likely to locate him soon.”

“Wait,” said Elise. “He’s whose Human contact?”

“The Cardassians who have been hired to kill Lynne Hamilton,” explained Tuvok with admirable patience. “It’s difficult for a Cardassian to do anything on Earth without attracting attention. The assassins hired a Human contact to take care of the organizational details that would enable them to find and eliminate their target.”

“Organizational details.’ That’s such a clean phrase.” Elise was starting to sound like herself again. “So that man planted the microtransmitter in this office?”

“I can’t know for certain, but I believe so. Certainly he’s the one who made the purchase; we have video of the transaction.”

“But in reality he could have handed the transmitter off to someone who works here, couldn’t he? It would have been easy for someone else to do it. Like the cleaning staff—they have access to the offices, and they’re here when everyone else is gone.”

Alison couldn’t imagine Ben involved in something like this.

“It’s possible, but unlikely,” said Tuvok. “These Cardassians are a cell from the old Obsidian Order. They would not spread their work around; it’s not in their nature or their training. The fewer individuals involved in an operation, the less likely that the operation itself will be compromised. They only use a Human contact because they have to. And their caution is justified—I know who their contact is now. When we find him, we have a connection to them. And we will also have reduced their operational ability.”
Elise was attentively taking it all in. “Will he be able to tell you who hired them?”

“I don’t believe so. It’s extremely unlikely that they would have told Mr. Wiler anything more than what he needed to know to accomplish his objectives. For that I need to work at the other end of the chain. Ms. Hamilton, now that you have more of the full picture and know that Dr. Necheyev is truly not a suspect, is there anything you can tell me that might help me in my investigation? Anything you didn’t say when I interviewed you yesterday?”

There was a long pause, and Alison found it significant that Elise didn’t immediately say no. She seemed to be struggling with something as she studiously refused to meet anyone’s eyes.

“You do know something,” Alison breathed. “God, Elise, why didn’t you say anything before?”

Silently Elise shook her head. “Because I don’t think it’s him,” she said at last. “I don’t want to believe it could be.”

Tuvok and Alison looked at each other. “Could be whom?” asked Tuvok.

Elise’s shoulders rose and fell as she took a deep breath, let it out and looked up at them. “Charles is in debt to the Orion Syndicate,” she said. “He’s been leveraging loans and investors by using his future income as a guarantee. Without that income, he’s in a lot of trouble.”

“The Orion Syndicate? Is he completely out of his mind?” Alison couldn’t believe her ears. The members of that syndicate did not take financial losses lightly. If Charles couldn’t pay off his debts, he could very well be in as much danger as Lynne.

Elise gave a short, humorless laugh. “Out of his mind? In a way, I suppose. He’s been trying to save his marriage. He got it into his head that Adele would respect him more if he brought his own income into the marriage, separate from the Hamilton fortune. So he’s been pursuing an ambitious investment project. It has the potential to make a huge profit, but it needs a lot of capital to start with. He couldn’t raise all the funds on his own, so he went to the Orion Syndicate.”

“How do you know this?” asked Tuvok.

“Who do you think he came to first? I’m one of the investors. Commander, if you can at all avoid it, please don’t share this information
with anyone else. I’m sure you can understand why Charles would not want his financial arrangements widely known.”

It took several minutes of questioning before Tuvok was convinced that Elise had told him every detail, and by that time Alison could see signs of very real distress in her. Though she wouldn’t trust any of the board officers until this mess was cleared up, it did seem increasingly unlikely that Elise had been involved. Not unless she was a world-class actress, and Alison had known her long enough to dismiss that possibility.

When Tuvok finished, she encouraged Elise to let them take her home.

“I’m fine,” said Elise. “Thanks for the offer, but I just want to get out of here.”

“You and me both. I still haven’t had dinner.”

Elise looked at her comm unit. “It’s after ten! Do you always eat this late?”

“Only when I’ve used my dinner to take down an intruder in my office.” At Elise’s blank look, she added, “That’s what I hit you with. My chicken pad thai.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Elise snorted. “This just gets better and better. What a complete fuck of a day.”

“It hasn’t been a complete fuck,” said Alison. “You don’t believe I’m a killer anymore, do you?”

“No, I think I’m over that.”

“And I’m pretty sure you’re not, either. So there you go—progress.”

Elise shrugged. “All right, fine. My hovercraft is in the lot.”

Alison locked the door behind them, then called Ben on her comm unit to alert him to a rather unusual mess in the hall. “I’m sorry, Ben,” she said. “I tripped and fell, and my dinner is all over the hallway.”

“That’s all right, Dr. Necheyev,” came Ben’s voice. “As long as you’re okay.”

“I am,” she assured him. “Just a little embarrassed. And a lot hungry.”

He laughed and told her to get home and feed herself, and Alison thanked him before clicking her comm unit off and sliding it in her pocket. “What?” she said, as Elise looked at her strangely.

“Just…thank you,” said Elise. “For not telling him the truth.”

“He didn’t need to know. And you’re welcome.”
Alison flew Elise home, while Tuvok followed in Alison’s hovercraft. It was a silent flight, other than Elise giving directions in short, terse sentences. At one point Alison advised her to take an anti-inflammatory for her nose, but when her well-meaning words got a mere nod in response, she gave it up. When they arrived at Elise’s house she parked the craft, walked Elise to her door, bid her good night and left again, anxious to get back to her own home. She was halfway down the walk when Elise called, “Alison, wait.”

She turned back. “What?”

In a few steps, Elise closed the distance between them. “I need to…” She paused, gave Alison a ghost of her normal smile, and admitted, “This is hard.”

“What is?” Alison crossed her arms. “Just say it. I’ve never known you to hold back before.”

“You’ve never known me outside of board meetings. And I’ve never known you in any other capacity either, which is probably a big part of the problem.”

“What problem?”

“This! God, everything about this. You said it would be a cold day in hell before I showed any grace. If anyone has ever thought that little of me before, I guess I’ve just been lucky enough not to know it.” She blew on her ungloved hands and rubbed them together, then tucked them under her arms. “I need to apologize. I’m sorry, Alison. For suspecting you, for what I did in the board meeting yesterday, and for being a total ass. You were right about a lot of things. And Lynne and the rest of the people on Voyager were beyond lucky that you were looking out for them. I’m in awe, really. I’ve never known anyone before who saved a life, and you saved almost a hundred and fifty of them.”

“Actually you know several people who have saved lives. You know Captain Janeway, Seven of Nine, Commander Sandovhar, Commander Tuvok—all of them have saved Voyager from total destruction at one point or another during the years they were stranded. I’ve heard a few stories from Lynne. And there are a few people on Voyager who owe their lives to Lynne, too, but I haven’t gotten all those stories yet.”

Elise smiled and shook her head. “I stand corrected. But...they were saving their friends and their shipmates. You saved a ship full of strangers. It’s different.”
"I don’t think it is,” said Alison. “But thank you. And I accept your apology.”

“Will you accept something else?”

“What’s that?”

“Will you let me buy you another dinner sometime? To replace the one you almost broke my nose with?”

Alison couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, I will,” she said. “But it has to be chicken pad thai.”
B’Elanna put her spanner down and carefully pulled the conduit away. With gentle hands she worked the panel free and laid it in a crate at her feet. When she straightened, the circuitry she’d exposed seemed to look at her reproachfully, and she felt a little pang in her heart.

“It’s funny,” she said, looking thoughtfully at her work.

“What is?” Revi tugged at a grid on the other side of the alcove.

“When these things first arrived on Voyager, I’d have given half a year’s rations for the sheer joy of beaming them back into space and then blowing them up with a torpedo.”

“And me along with them,” said Seven from the next alcove over.

“Well, yeah, but that was when you were still fully Borg.” B’Elanna flashed a smile at her. “And maybe for a couple of years afterwards.”

“A couple,” Seven agreed, raising a knowing eyebrow.

“But now we’re here taking them apart, and—it’s killing me a little bit. This actually hurts.”

“I know,” said Lynne from her position next to Seven. “When I first had to use one of these things, I might have cheerfully gone along with your torpedo fantasy. But everything’s changed. These are a part of our lives together.”

“It’s not just that. They’re a part of Voyager. I feel like I’m stripping my own ship.”
Revi paused. “It does feel like that, doesn’t it? I have a lot of memories associated with this alcove unit.”

“So do I.” Seven had stopped too, and was directing a look of such love toward Revi that B’Elanna felt like she was intruding just standing between them.

“Kahless.” She stepped backwards. “Haven’t you two gotten past the honeymoon stage yet?”

“Actually, I believe we’re about to enter it.” Seven shifted her gaze to B’Elanna and smiled brightly. “In ten days, Revi and I will have been engaged for six months.”

“Okaaaay. Does that have some special significance?”

“Our agreement was that after six months, we would move in together. I wanted to right away, but Revi was more cautious.”

“I know, I know,” said Revi. “And I’ll probably never hear the end of it. But I still think it was the right decision.”

“Wait a minute,” said Lynne, setting her own spanner on top of the panel she’d been working on. “Why are you so excited about what’s happening in ten days when you’ve already been living together for the past two weeks? Is something going to change that I’m not aware of? You’d better not be thinking about moving out.”

“Well, eventually, yes,” said Revi.

“We can’t presume on Gretchen’s hospitality indefinitely,” Seven added.

“Speaking for Kathryn, who can speak for Gretchen, yes you can.”

Revi laughed. “A double-proxy vote! Well done, and very presumptuous.”

“It is not, and I’m completely serious. Don’t you dare leave. Not yet. What the hell are we doing installing these alcoves in the barn if you’re not planning to stay?”

B’Elanna heard a note in Lynne’s voice that made her look at her friend more closely. “I don’t think they’re planning to leave right away, Lynne.”

“No, we’re not,” said Revi. “We’re just making some plans for our future.”

“Well, do me a favor, would you? Put that future off until you’re married.”

“That’s six months from now,” Seven objected. “We can’t possibly impose on Gretchen that long.”
Lynne stared at them in silence, then said in a choked voice, “I’m taking a break. See you in a few minutes.” She turned and walked out, leaving three very dismayed women behind her.

“I don’t understand,” said Seven. “She knows we can’t stay.”

“There’s knowing, and then there’s knowing,” said B’Elanna. “I’m going after her.”

“Should we come?” asked Revi.

“I don’t think so. She left for a reason. But, just for the record, how long do you plan to stay on the Janeway farm?”

“Gods, B’Elanna, we haven’t set a date. We’ve just been talking about where we’d like to live, that’s all.”

“We’re not going anywhere until we’re better prepared,” said Seven. “We’ve made no decisions yet. There hasn’t been sufficient time.”

“Well, I think the invitation is pretty clear. If you’ve got nowhere pressing to go, don’t go.”

“It’s not that we want to,” said Revi. “But it’s not our house.”

B’Elanna nodded, then stepped off the alcove and followed her friend out the door. As she exited the cargo bay, she said, “Computer, locate Lynne Hamilton.”

“Lynne Hamilton is on deck three, section one.”

On her way to her quarters, then. “Not good, Lynne,” B’Elanna muttered as she strode toward the turbolift. “That’s just going to make it worse.”

It took her less than a minute to arrive at the Captain’s quarters, but Lynne kept her waiting another thirty seconds before opening the door.

“Hi. Chasing me down?” She stood back, inviting B’Elanna in.

“I haven’t gotten to see enough of you today,” said B’Elanna, walking past her and turning around. “Sorry, but I just can’t leave you alone.”

Lynne glanced at her with suspiciously shiny eyes. “I wish everyone felt that way.”

“They do, Fossil,” B’Elanna said softly, and watched as the first tears fell. “Oh, Lynne. Come here.” She pulled her friend into a hug, not surprised when Lynne wrapped her up tightly.

“I’m sorry,” Lynne whispered.

“Don’t be. Kahless on a crutch, it’s not like you don’t have fifty reasons to do this. I don’t know how you’ve held on this long.”
Lynne’s breath shuddered as she wept. “Because I had to. Kathryn’s worried enough about me already.”

“You don’t think she already knows that it’ll break your heart when Revi and Seven leave?” Oh, great choice of words, you idiot. B’Elanna cursed herself as Lynne cried harder, but then decided that maybe she just needed to get it out.

“It’ll break hers, too,” Lynne managed. “It’s not just me. God, they can’t leave! Do you know they’re talking about going to Vulcan? What the hell am I going to do? I don’t want them that far away!” She squeezed B’Elanna again and let her go, standing back to wipe her cheeks. “I feel so selfish. Vulcan would be perfect for them. But it’s tearing my heart out. You’re already too far away, but at least you’re within transporter range. Vulcan…” A fresh wave of tears rushed down her cheeks. “Shit. Hang on.” She abruptly turned and vanished into the bedroom, emerging a moment later with a kerchief. “I hate crying.”

“Me too. But if ever anyone needed to, it’s you.”

“No, I don’t.” Lynne walked over to the couch and practically fell into it. “What I need to be doing is taking apart those alcoves, and packing up this room.” With a sweeping gesture she indicated the empty crates that were waiting against the wall. “We were supposed to be out of here last week, but Necheyev let us stay because we didn’t even know if we could come here safely. At least now we can trust Starfleet again.” She wiped her cheeks, then rested her forehead against the kerchief in her fist and closed her eyes. B’Elanna sat next to her and rubbed the back of her neck.

“This isn’t just about Seven and Revi,” she said.

Lynne snorted, shaking her head as more tears leaked from beneath her lids. “Whatever gave you that idea? Our life’s been nothing but a lark since the moment we landed. Kathryn’s famous, I’m rich, everyone we love is home safe and sound—sounds like a fairy tale to me.”

“My god, you’re sarcastic when you’re upset.”

“I learned that from Revi.”

“I’m wounded. You learned it from me first.”

Lynne lifted her head and gave her a quick, crooked smile. “I guess I am surrounded by qualified teachers.”

“Damn straight.”

Lynne chuckled, then leaned her head back on the couch and gave a
shuddering sigh. “Okay. I think I’m done crying.” Another tear ran out of
the corner of her eye. “Fuck. Nope, not yet.”

“Give yourself some credit. You’ve been through pure hell these last
few weeks. Sometimes I’m amazed that you’re even functioning, much
less taking on the damn Hamilton Foundation board.” She’d heard about
that from Revi, who had called her after the meeting to give her an
update.

“Don’t forget the President. I’m taking him on tomorrow.”

“You are? Why?” This was news.

Lynne raised her head abruptly, looking at her with wide eyes. “Uh…
Foundation stuff. As soon as I had an official title, I had a job, too. I get to
glad hand with politicians and rich idiots in case they can steer other rich
people our way.”

“Better you than me.” B’Elanna knew Lynne was keeping something
from her, but she wasn’t about to press her on it now. “The point is,
you’re entitled to this, and I really don’t think you should be trying so
damn hard to be strong for Janeway.”

“Kathryn.” Lynne snorted again, but this time it was mostly a laugh.
“Come on, B’Elanna, just say it. You’re going to have to learn how sooner
or later.”

“All right, fine. You don’t have to be that strong for Kathryn.”

“There you go! See? It wasn’t that hard.”

“No, but I’m not saying it to her face. I did that once and it took me a
week to get over it.”

Lynne laughed for real this time, and it seemed to help. Her face was
flushed and her eyes were brilliant, and the heightened color gave her a
momentary beauty that took B’Elanna’s breath away.

“That’s just not fair,” she complained. “I cry and I look like a shuttle
hit me from behind. You cry and you look stunning.”

“God, you’re a good friend. I look like shit when I cry.”

“Careful, Fossil. You’re insulting the honor of a Klingon.”

Lynne lifted her hands in surrender. “Okay. I take it back. You’re not a
good friend.” She dropped her hands as her expression turned serious.

“Yes, you are. Thanks for coming after me. I really needed a hug.”

“I know. But you know you could have gotten three if you’d stayed,
don’t you?”

“Are you kidding? I can’t do this in front of them! They don’t need any
more pressure from me. They have their lives to live, and that can’t involve making decisions based on what I’d prefer.”

“It’s not a preference. Right now it’s a need.”

“Great. Even better.”

“It might be their need, too. They don’t want to leave anytime soon, Lynne. But they seem to be pretty worried about imposing too long.”

“They can’t possibly impose too long. And I’m not just saying that for me. Gretchen loves them, and even more than that she loves what they do for Kathryn.”

“And for you.”

Lynne shrugged.

“Well, I think you need to make sure that Gretchen tells them that herself. They’ll stay as long they’re certain of their welcome. Besides, they know they’re your family. That counts for a hell of a lot.”

“Yeah, because god knows my real family isn’t helping much. I can’t believe those people share my name.”

B’Elanna settled deeper into the couch, resting her elbow on its back and her head on her fist as she faced Lynne. “Tell me about them. I got the report from Revi, but I’m curious to hear what you think. Brian’s the Chair, right? And sort of the head of the family.” She’d sat in on one of the strategy sessions at her father-in-law’s house, just to get an idea of what Lynne was facing, but the sheer volume of information being discussed had left her more than happy to let the pros handle it.

Lynne shifted, matching her position. “Right. Well, he’s definitely head of the Foundation; I’m not so sure about the family. But maybe it carries over. Anyway, he looks a bit like Lieutenant Parker would if he were thirty years older, had a lot more attitude, and big bushy gray eyebrows.”

B’Elanna grinned at the description. “Got it.”

“He’s actually the best of the bunch, I think. He seems to have a lot of integrity. But he also has that manner of someone who’s been used to power all his life, you know? Not much warmth there. And he was playing some ridiculous power games with me in the beginning, before he figured out that I’m the real deal. You’d think someone who had as much power as he’s used to wouldn’t be playing such shitty little games.”

“Sometimes the people who have the most power are the ones who are the least secure about it.”

“Maybe. His sister is on the board too, but she’s not an officer. That’s
Melanie, and she’s a bit of a bitch. She was pleasant for exactly as long as it looked like I might be manageable. Then she went on the offensive. Not overtly to me, though. She’s the kind of person who fights without looking at you. And she can insult you and make it sound genteel.”

“I’d kill her,” said B’Elanna matter-of-factly, and Lynne chuckled.

“No, you’d kill Adele. She’s the real bitch of the bunch. I don’t get it, because she’s Brian’s daughter, but apparently none of his integrity rubbed off on her. She’s the kind who insults you to your face and doesn’t bother to make it sound genteel. Besides that, she’s got the nasty attitude of someone who thinks money and power makes you a superior person. Anyone who doesn’t have it isn’t worth her notice. That seems to include Alison, and that really got my hackles up. Jesus Christ, how can anyone look down their nose at Alison?”

“She’d have lasted about eight minutes on Voyager,” said B’Elanna.

“I’d have given her six. And I’m looking forward to teaching her a few lessons.” Lynne’s smile was just a bit predatory before she continued, “Adele’s not an officer, which is apparently a big injury to her pride. But her husband is. That’s Charles Fornay, the Secretary. He seemed pretty decent—even offered to resign his position so Elise could have it. I kind of liked him, but he’s married to Adele, so he’s either a gold-digger or a moron, and neither of those are attractive character traits.”

“Maybe he really loves her,” suggested B’Elanna, just to play devil’s advocate.

“But that would make him a moron.”

“Lynne! I can’t believe you of all people would say that about love.”

“Okay, okay, you’re right. It would just make him pathetic. Anyway, it turns out that he’s now our prime suspect.”

“What? I’ve been on this ship with you for two hours and you’re only now getting around to telling me this?” B’Elanna punched her in the upper arm. “I can’t believe you!”

Lynne rubbed her arm. “Do that again and I’ll pack you in one of those crates.”

“You wish. Now tell me what the hell happened. Did Tuvok find something?”

“Sort of. He said that Alison called him to the Foundation building late last night because somebody had broken into her office. Turns out it was Elise Hamilton.”
“Elise? What the fuck? I thought you said Charles was your prime suspect.”

“He is. Apparently Elise thought Alison was the killer, and was trying to find some evidence to prove it. When Tuvok convinced her that Alison really wasn’t a suspect, she caved in and admitted that Charles is in deep debt with the Orion Syndicate. Which she of course neglected to mention when he was interviewing her the day before.”

“Whoa.” B’Elanna was impressed. “This family of yours deals with some nasty people.”

“Tell me about it. Anyway, Charles was using his future income as a guarantee for loans from the Syndicate. And of course my arrival threatened that income.”

“Which means your arrival actually threatened his life.” B’Elanna could easily imagine it. “You were right, he is a moron. All the wealth and power he had and it wasn’t enough?”

“Apparently it’s the source of that wealth and power that’s the problem. He married into it. Now he wants his own money. I guess there are some marital issues involved.”

“Oh, for god’s sake. Never mind what I said about love. Is Tuvok bringing him in?”

Lynne shook her head. “Not enough evidence. But he’s questioning him today—probably right now, in fact. Wouldn’t it be lovely if he just confessed and we could put an end to this whole damn thing?”

Privately B’Elanna thought it shouldn’t end until she had the pleasure of beating that man at least three-quarters of the way to death. If he was guilty, it was the least he deserved. On the other hand... “Actually, it would be lovely if he confessed and then Tuvok turned him over to the Orion Syndicate. That would pretty much take care of things.”

“Yeah, that’s what Kathryn said. She said in a case like this, Charles would be far better off throwing himself on the mercy of the Federation court system, because at least that system has some mercy. God, I hope we find out today. I’m so tired of this.”

“I know, Fossil.” B’Elanna rubbed her arm in sympathy. “Interesting that Elise broke into Alison’s office. Sounds like your plan to pit them against each other really worked.”

“Yeah, but I meant to pit them against each other, not against Alison.”
“It still worked. Elise ratted on Charles. So much for solidarity—he offers her his position and she turns him in.”

“You make it sound like a bad thing. Fuck, I’m thrilled she turned him in.”

B’Elanna looked at her closely. “Funny, you don’t seem all that thrilled.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about this all morning, and I keep coming back to the same thing. If Elise really, truly thought that Charles was the killer, then why was she breaking into Alison’s office?”

“Maybe because she really, truly doesn’t want to believe he’s the killer.”

“Maybe,” said Lynne doubtfully.

“So, tell me about her. We haven’t covered her yet.”

“Okay. So you know she’s Melanie’s daughter.”

“And Brian’s niece?”

“Right. Which makes her and Adele cousins.”

“You’re going to have to draw me a chart.”

Lynne chuckled. “Hell, I had to draw one for myself when Alison was first telling me about all of these connections. Anyway, I’m not sure what to think of her. She was damn nasty to Alison in the board meeting, and that pissed me off, but Alison says she’s not normally like that. And I think part of the reason she was such a bitch was because she really thought Alison was guilty—if not of hiring the assassins, then at least of telling them where we were. It wasn’t like Adele-nastiness, which doesn’t seem to require an actual reason. But even when she thought I was taking her title, she never attacked me or even spoke up to defend it. Melanie and Adele did all of that for her.”

“Maybe she’s used to them fighting her battles.”

“I don’t think so. Elise doesn’t strike me as the kind of person who needs anyone to fight her battles for her. You should have seen how she tore into Alison. If she’d had her way, Alison would have been fired then and there.”

“Damn, she is a bitch.”

“Yeah, but if she really thought Alison was guilty, then she did have some reason for it. If I thought Alison was guilty I’d fire her too. And another thing—she thanked me for making the co-vice chair offer.”

B’Elanna raised her eyebrows. “Well, that is a sorry family you’ve got if you’re actually impressed that one of them knows how to say thank you.”
“I know. It doesn’t make me very anxious to meet the rest of the family. Elise has a younger brother named Stephen who apparently has no interest in the board, and Brian’s wife Catarina is supposed to be nice—according to Alison—and then there are a bunch of cousins and nieces and ex-spouses and I just don’t even want to get into it.”

“Do you think you’ll be invited to meet the rest of the family?”

“Well, somehow I don’t really picture this bunch having a backyard barbecue, you know? If there is any kind of invitation, which I don’t think will be happening any time soon, then I have a bad feeling it’s going to involve some boring function.” She lowered her voice for the last word, and B’Elanna burst out laughing.

“Oh no, not a function!”

Lynne laughed with her, and B’Elanna added, “You realize that as presumptive head of the Foundation, you’re going to be attending more functions than Janeway did in the Delta Quadrant.”

Lynne stopped laughing. “Kathryn,” she said, raising a finger. “Not Janeway. And Jesus, that’s not funny.”
Kathryn heaved a sigh of relief as she stepped onto the Starfleet transporter pad. Another day, another debriefing—and another lesson in what to say and mostly what not to say during her upcoming interviews. Not for the first time, it struck her as the ultimate irony that Admiral Necheyev, of all people, was trying to train her in public relations.

The transporter beam took her, and a moment later she saw the familiar surroundings of the Bloomington transport station waver into focus. She stepped off the platform, nodded to the operator and headed downstairs to the underground lot. Soon she was rising up through the exit, breathing easier as the city came into view. “Home sweet Indiana,” she said, and swung into the transit corridor to get out of town.

This was already her favorite part of the day, when she was whizzing over the road in her hovercraft, passing farms and hills and even specific trees that she’d known since her childhood. How many times had she driven this route over the years?

Not enough to get tired of it, she thought as she passed the MacGruder farmhouse. She still smiled to see it, because she always remembered how her stomach had flipped at her first view of it after landing Voyager. The last farmhouse before her own, and now the ultimate landmark in her memory.

Smoothly she tilted the hovercraft around the hill and watched her
mother’s farm come into view, a residual chill ghosting down her spine. She supposed that after a while, the excitement of seeing home would wear off.

But not yet.

After setting the craft down in front of the house, she collected her briefcase, took a deep breath, and opened the door into an Indiana February night. “Jesus god, that’s cold,” she gasped. Every time she came from San Francisco to here, it was a shock to her system. Anxious to get out of the freezing air, she ran up the porch steps and hit the keypad. The moment the door opened, a furry red ball exploded up from the floor just behind it, bouncing and prancing.

“Hi, Molly,” she laughed. “I missed you, too. Come on, get out of the way so I can get inside.” She dropped her briefcase by the door and gave her dog a gentle shove. “Move your furry butt.”

Molly moved precisely as far as necessary, then bounced up again, only settling to her haunches when Kathryn started in on a two-handed scratch and general lovefest. With a last kiss to Molly’s forehead, she straightened up and saw her mother watching with a smile.

“I love the welcoming parties here,” she said.

“I love watching it. I always know when you’re landing, because she wakes up from a dead sleep and runs to the door. Your nose is already red, by the way. Why don’t you take a coat?”

“Because I only need it for the fifteen meters between the door and the hovercraft. It’s a pain.”

“Someday you’re going to arrive home in a lovely wet snowstorm, the kind where it’s just barely freezing and the snowflakes are half melted already, and—”

“And then I’ll wish I had it,” Kathryn finished for her. “I know. You can tell me that you told me so then.” She looked around. “Nobody else home?”

“Operation Alcove is still going on in the barn.”

“Really? I’d thought they’d have had those installed by now. Were there any problems?”

“No, I don’t think so. They’re just tightening the last bolts, or so Lynne said.”

Kathryn opened the closet door and pulled out her coat. “Think I’ll go see what’s happening.”
“Now you take a coat.” Gretchen shook her head in mock dismay. “Dinner’s in half an hour. You barely made it home in time.”

“Blame Admiral Necheyev for that.” Kathryn tugged on the coat and zipped it up. “Don’t worry, I’ll drag her back. Are Seven and Revi eating with us?”

“Not tonight. Seven said she wanted to try making my pesto pasta recipe.”

“She does love the kitchen in that guest house.”

“I love having them there. Helps make up for some of the times when it was too damn quiet around here.”

Kathryn saw the flash of emotion in her mother’s face and paused to give her a sympathetic smile. “I know.”

Gretchen nodded, then made a shooing motion. “Get out of here or you’re not going to get back in time. And I am not waiting. Salmon has to be served when it’s ready and no later.”

“Salmon? With your special dressing?” At the answering nod, she said, “Don’t worry, we’ll be here.” She scooted out the door, visions of grilled salmon with lemon dill dressing floating in her head. This time the air didn’t quite take her breath away, though of course the insulated coat helped a great deal. She trotted down the shoveled path to the barn, smiling at the picture it made in the darkness with warm yellow light spilling onto the snow through its large, high windows.

Stepping through the door, she found Lynne, Seven and Revi just putting away the last tools. The alcoves hummed against the far wall, looking wildly out of place in the old-fashioned barn. But the sheer familiarity of them gave her a sense of welcome security, and she paused to take in the sight.

“Hi, love.” Lynne walked up to pull her into a sweet embrace. “I missed you,” she said quietly.

“I missed you too.” Kathryn stole a quick kiss before letting her go. “They look great.”

“Don’t they? And it’s such a relief to have access to them again without jumping through the security hoops.”

“That’s for sure,” said Revi as she and Seven walked up. “No more asking Starfleet’s permission to go to bed.”

“Did everything go all right? The energy dispersal field is solid?” The
last thing they needed was for an orbital scan to find Borg energy signatures in the barn.

“The field is functioning perfectly and there were no issues with the alcoves,” answered Seven. “Except when B’Elanna insisted on a less efficient method of packing.”

“Oh god.” Kathryn could just picture it. “Was any blood shed?”

“Not on my part,” said Seven coolly, and just for a moment, Kathryn didn’t know what to think. Then Seven’s lips tipped into a smile. “Kathryn, either you’ve become gullible or I’m becoming far more proficient at this form of humor.”

Revi made a choking sound, then gave up and laughed out loud. “Gods, Kathryn, your face!”

“I can’t believe you actually fell for that.” Lynne shook her head.

“I didn’t,” protested Kathryn, but nobody was listening. “Fine. Go ahead and laugh.”

Revi caught her hand and squeezed it. “We’re not laughing.” Another snort gave the lie to her statement. “I mean, we’re just enjoying having you back. We missed you.”

“I can see that. You’ve missed the butt of your humor.”

“No, we had B’Elanna for that most of the day,” said Lynne. She wrapped an arm around Kathryn’s waist. “But I think you’re tired, because you’re normally not that gullible.”

“I am,” Kathryn admitted. “Long day.”

“And long night,” Seven reminded her. “You worked a double shift.”

“But I don’t have to anymore,” Kathryn said, looking past them to the alcoves. “I can’t tell you what a relief it is to see them here. That was the last big thing I had to worry about on Voyager.”

The others turned to follow her gaze, watching the jagged green lights flashing above the three alcoves.


“I was just thinking about what my mom always used to say whenever I forgot my manners. ‘What, were you raised in a barn?’ And look, here I am. Sleeping in a barn.”

“At least you’re in good company,” said Revi.

Lynne nodded. “The best, actually. Mom would have approved.”
Revi was predictably embarrassed at her joke being turned into a compliment. “Well, I’m ready for a shower. Anybody want to come with me?”

“Redirection,” said Seven in an aside to Kathryn. “I learned that from Counselor Troi.”

Kathryn smothered a smile. “By all means, go shower, then. I’m just going to check over the alcoves.”

“Seven already checked everything,” said Lynne.

“I know. Humor me.” Kathryn didn’t know how to explain that what she really wanted was to run her hands over the machinery. She needed the physical connection with this piece of *Voyager* in her mother’s barn.

As she examined the fittings and checked the readouts, she was vaguely aware of the conversation at the front of the barn. She didn’t notice the silence until she had worked her way through the third alcove and turned to find Lynne standing alone, watching her.

“Did they leave?” she asked in surprise.

“About five minutes ago, yes. You were very busy with your little petting session.”

Kathryn walked over, a sheepish smile on her face. “Can’t hide anything from you.”

“Why would you try?” Lynne pulled her into a hug. “Besides, I think you look cute fondling Borg alcoves.”

“And that’s why I love you.”

It felt good to kiss Lynne there, in a space that had suddenly become a physical juncture between her two lives. She’d spent untold hours of her childhood playing in this barn, and now an important part of her adulthood was there as well.

“I really did miss you,” Lynne whispered, nuzzling her throat. “And I’m having thoughts about christening this barn properly.”

Kathryn laughed, running her hands up Lynne’s back. “You’ll have to hold that thought, sweetheart. There’s salmon with lemon dill sauce coming out of Mom’s kitchen, and not even for—”

They froze in place, knowing from each other’s reaction that both of them had heard the small thump from the opposite end of the barn. For a fraction of a second, Lynne’s eyes burned into hers. Then they both dropped, rolled, and came up in a running crouch to take shelter behind
the first alcove. The door was just too far, and they’d be too easy a target trying to get to it.

Kathryn tapped her commbadge. “Janeway to security,” she said softly. “Intruder in the barn.”

“Understood,” came the response.

The man posted just outside the barn was through the door in less than six seconds. Phaser at the ready, he side stepped toward them, keeping them in his peripheral vision while constantly scanning the rest of the space. Kathryn was impressed with his training.

A few seconds later a man and woman came in—the team who’d been guarding the front and back doors of the house. The other members of the security team had been patrolling the property, but their job now was to run in and fill the main posts, to guard against a multi-pronged attack.

As the first man came within hearing range, Kathryn murmured, “Either the hovercraft or the workshop.” He nodded, acknowledging her without taking his eyes off the rest of the barn. Using hand motions, he passed the information to the others, who immediately moved forward while he stayed behind to guard his charges.

This end of the building had been thoroughly cleaned in preparation for the alcove installation, but the other half was still a jumble. It hadn’t changed much in the last seven years. A second hovercraft sat near the center, by the big main doors. Beyond that were the various gardening and yard care implements, her father’s collection of antique hand tools, and piles of old lumber that had been there ever since she could remember. At the very end, part of the space had been walled off into a closed workshop. It and the hovercraft were the only two places that could hide an assassin.

She chafed at her enforced non-participation. It was simply not her style to hide behind a protector while others took the risk for her. But then she looked at Lynne, who was watching the two guards advancing across the barn, and knew that her wife was chafing twice as much. She put a gentle hand on her back, needing the connection. Lynne was strung as tight as a tension relay, the muscles of her back twitching as Kathryn’s hand made contact.

The two guards checked out and cleared the hovercraft first, then advanced cautiously toward the workshop. They flanked the door, nodded at each other, then flung the door open and burst in.
Kathryn waited for the shouts, the phaser fire, the sounds of a fight, but what she heard was absolute silence. She frowned in confusion. What in the hell was going on?

At last she heard a slight scuff, though it sounded more like the guards were casually moving furniture than fighting. They walked back out, their phasers holstered and their body language telegraphing the absence of danger even before they gave the hand signal. The woman was holding something in her hands.

The guard next to them holstered his phaser as well, then spoke into his commbadge. “All clear.”

Kathryn and Lynne stepped out from the wall. “What—” Kathryn began, but Lynne interrupted her.

“Is that a kitten?”

They all came together in the middle of the barn, where the female guard held out a tiny ball of gray and black fur. “Here’s your intruder,” she said with a smile.

“Oh my god, it’s so cute!” Lynne carefully took the kitten, which was so young that it couldn’t possibly have been weaned. It mewed weakly as it was transferred, and Lynne held it tight against her body. “Shh,” she said, petting its head with a single finger. “You’re okay. You’re going to be fine.”

“There’s a second one inside,” said the woman. “I’m afraid it’s dead. I’m guessing something has happened to the mother. This one’s nearly starved as well; it couldn’t even stand up.”

“We don’t have cats,” said Kathryn. “The mother must have been feral. I’ll have to call the park office tomorrow to report it.” She shook her head. “Well, sorry for the false alarm. But thank you for your response; it was textbook perfect. If I didn’t know better I’d say you were Starfleet trained.”

“Thank you, Captain Janeway,” said the first man. “As a matter of fact, our tactical trainer is ex-Starfleet. He’ll be pleased to know that it shows.”

“It certainly does.” Kathryn was suddenly feeling a lot better about their private security team. “And I’d be happy to repeat that to anyone at your company who might benefit from hearing it.”

Wide smiles greeted that statement, and soon she had their names and the name of their trainer. She watched them troop out of the barn, feeling guilty that it had taken her this long to even ask who they were.
“We need to warm it up first,” said Lynne, turning toward the door. “It won’t be able to handle milk formula until we get its body temperature up. Poor thing! It would probably be dead if we hadn’t turned on the environmental controls when we beamed in with the alcoves.”

Kathryn put a hand on her arm. “Lynne…”

“What?” Lynne didn’t look up, her focus riveted to the kitten.

“Don’t get too attached. It’s a feral kitten. We need to turn it over to the park office tomorrow.”

That got her attention. “Why?”

Kathryn sighed. “This is an agricultural park. With a carefully balanced ecosystem. Feral cats are most certainly not a part of that—even one can kill enough rodents, birds and reptiles over its lifetime to throw the system off balance. This kitten needs to be removed.”

Lynne’s gaze cooled noticeably. “What exactly does ‘removed’ mean?”

“Well, I don’t think it’s weaned yet, and it’s half dead and probably sick and carrying parasites. The park office will make a decision based on their resources and the availability of—”

“Stop right there,” said Lynne. “I don’t want to hear it. You are not going to take this kitten away and kill it.”

“Lynne, you don’t have time to be a mother to an unweaned kitten!”

“Yes I do!” Lynne’s voice was unexpectedly loud, and the kitten mewed again. “Shhh, I’m sorry,” she told it in a far softer tone. “Don’t worry, you’re not going anywhere.” When she looked up again, the anger in her eyes stopped Kathryn cold. “Don’t even think it,” she warned. “I’ve had enough of death.”

“I understand that,” said Kathryn. “But are you prepared to keep this kitten for its lifetime? Because that’s what you’re getting into unless you’re willing to consider the alternative.”

Lynne petted the kitten’s tiny head again. “Well then,” she said, “meet the newest member of our family.”

While Seven was replicating the dried pasta—having insisted on cooking it herself, to Revi’s amusement—a call came in from the main house.

: Revi, will you—:
: Got it. :

Revi came into the kitchen and tapped the control panel on the screen. “Hi, Gretchen. Seven hasn’t had any problems...yet.”

“Hi, Gretchen!” called Seven from across the kitchen. “Don’t listen to her, I know exactly what to do.”

“Put a hold on your dinner, ladies,” said Gretchen. “We’ve got a small emergency over here.”

Seven dropped her pasta onto the counter and was beside Revi in three steps, her heart pounding. “Is everyone all right?”

Gretchen smiled reassuringly. “Everyone’s fine. Well, all the Humans, anyway. But we have a new guest who needs your skills, Revi. A kitten.”

Revi, who had already tensed in preparation for any kind of medical issue, now relaxed and stared at Gretchen in surprise. “A kitten? I’m not a veterinarian.”

“You’re the closest thing to it that we have. Can you come over?”

“Of course. I’ll be right there.”

“Thank you.” Gretchen nodded, and the screen went black.

Revi turned to Seven in utter confusion. “A kitten?”

They were at the main house in less than a minute, and the door opened even as they were climbing the steps. “Sorry to interrupt your dinner,” said Kathryn, waiting just inside.

“No problem,” said Revi. “Where the hell did you get a kitten?”

“In the barn.” Kathryn stepped aside to let them pass. “Apparently we had a feral cat living there, but something happened to her. There’s a second kitten still out there that didn’t make it.”

“Wouldn’t take long for a young kitten to freeze to death without its mother,” said Revi. “So where is this new guest?”

“In the kitchen.” Kathryn gestured down the hall.

They found Gretchen and Lynne at the table, looking at the tiny animal in Lynne’s lap. It lay motionless on a small pad, which Lynne had formed into a cup shape with her hands. Seven crouched next to her, intrigued to see her first juvenile feline. It didn’t look like the images she’d seen in her research of Earth’s terrestrial species.

“Is it still alive?” she asked.

“Barely.”

“Heating pad?” asked Revi, pulling a chair over and settling in front of them.
“Yeah. But I don’t know how to tell when it’s warm enough to eat.”

Revi took out a temperature probe from the medkit she’d carried over. “No way to do this but the uncomfortable way,” she said. “Seven, will you find out what the normal body temperature of a kitten should be?”

“Of course.” With a last look at the kitten, Seven walked over to the kitchen’s computer interface. A few commands took her to the Federation’s biological database, where she found a large entry on *Felis catus*. She scanned the page impatiently. Ah, there it was. “Thirty-six point one degrees at birth,” she reported. “By four weeks it should be between thirty-seven point two and thirty-eight point nine degrees.”

“That doesn’t help,” said Revi. “I have no idea how old this kitten is.”

“We know it’s not a newborn,” said Lynne. “Look, the ears are standing up. That doesn’t happen for a couple of weeks, does it?”

Seven had found another, more relevant bit of data. “Food can be offered once the rectal temperature is over thirty-four point four degrees.”

“Then we’re there,” said Revi. Seven turned in time to see her drop the probe back into its container and activate the sterilization function. “But judging by the lack of complaint just now, I’m thinking it’s a bit early for food. This kitten needs to be rehydrated first. Fortunately, that’s not species specific.” She stood up and walked to the replicator. “Computer, twenty milliliters of lactated Ringer’s solution with five percent dextrose, thirty-seven point five degrees, in a feeding-tube syringe. Tube diameter two millimeters, length fifteen centimeters.”

“Well, that’s the most complicated order that replicator has ever had,” said Gretchen.

Revi turned back with the syringe in her hand. “This would be a lot easier in sickbay.”

“We’ve already brought the alcoves over,” said Kathryn. “Maybe sickbay is the next step.”

“Hold this, please.” Revi handed the syringe to Seven. “Don’t touch the tube.” She quickly washed and dried her hand at the kitchen sink. As she took the syringe back, a slight hum told Seven that she’d just sterilized her Borg arm. “Okay, time to force feed a kitten.”

Seven watched in fascination as Revi sat down again, her outward calm belying the nervousness that came through their link. It never failed to amaze her how her partner could project such a different set of emotions than what she was actually feeling.
With a gentleness that might have surprised anyone who didn’t know how finely tuned a Borg hand clamp actually was, Revi forced the kitten’s mouth open and carefully slid in the feeding tube, using a finger to guide it. The kitten barely resisted, and soon Revi was able to release its head and start the flow of solution. “So far so good,” she said. “No choking, so I’ve got it down the esophagus and not a bronchial tube.”

“Is that a danger?” asked Lynne, watching the kitten closely.

“They’re pretty close together. And it’s been a long, long time since I studied Terran vertebrate anatomy.” Revi looked up. “Seven, this is going to take a few minutes. While we’re doing this, will you see if you can figure out how old our guest is?”

Glad for the opportunity to be useful, Seven turned back to the computer and began researching the specific biology of feline life stages. Presently she asked, “Does it have any teeth?”

“None that are erupted. But I felt a few bumps under the gums, so I’d say they’re close.”

“Then I can estimate that it’s between three and four weeks old. The ears stand up at two weeks, and teeth begin to erupt at four. Weaning begins at four weeks as well.”

“Good news for you, Lynne,” said Gretchen.

“This is fascinating.” Seven wasn’t really talking to them anymore; she was too caught up in what she was learning. “Kittens don’t expel waste on their own. The mother stimulates this function by licking the perineum.”

“Bad news for you, Lynne,” said Kathryn, an evil smile creasing her face.

“Thanks a lot. I do know that much about kittens. You have to take a warm, wet washcloth and stroke its little butt after you feed it.”

“Perineum,” corrected Seven. “The area between the anus and—”

“I know, Seven. I just like the word ‘butt’ better.”

Seven found this distressingly inexact, as the perineum was not at all the same thing as the butt, but she refrained from explaining any further.

“Just so you know, that particular activity will not be taking place in my kitchen,” said Gretchen, and Revi laughed.

“Come on, Gretchen, are you telling me you never changed Kathryn’s diaper in the kitchen? Not ever?”

“That is not the same thing.”
“No, it’s a whole lot bigger. This kitten would have to defecate twenty times to equal one of Kathryn’s—”

“That’s enough,” interrupted Kathryn. “I just felt my captain’s dignity go right out the window.”

“Is that all it takes? I’ll remember that. Okay, we’re done.” Revi carefully extracted the feeding tube. “We’ll give it fifteen minutes or so to absorb that through all its systems, and then try a little milk. In the meantime, I’ll figure out the formula and program the replicator.”

Seven had found something else that intrigued her. “Revi, what did its…‘little butt’ look like when you took its temperature?”

Revi looked up. “You want to sex it? I didn’t even look, I was just focusing on the probe. Come do the comparison yourself.”

That wasn’t quite what Seven had expected, but she could hardly refuse after the public invitation. Which Revi knew, of course.

: Hey, you’re the one who wanted to know. You figure it out. :

: You’re the doctor! I’m just the engineer. :

Revi smiled at her. : It doesn’t take a doctor to sex a kitten. :

: You are so fortunate that I can never resist that smile. :

The smile grew even larger, which Seven had been counting on. She ran a hand down the back of Revi’s neck as she crouched next to Lynne.

“May I?”

“Have at it.” Lynne lifted the kitten’s tail while Seven peered at the structure of its orifices. It wasn’t quite as clear-cut as the diagrams she’d been studying, which had featured nice clean line drawings. In this real-life application, the kitten’s fur nearly obscured the landmarks she was looking for. But…ah, there it was. A small bump between the anus and the urinary opening. She straightened.

“It’s a male.”

“Oh, my god,” said Gretchen. “After all these years, there’s a penis in the house.”
Alison laughed. “So you had security scrambling on high alert for a half-dead kitten?”

Walking next to her with an easy stride, Lynne chuckled as well. “Yeah. Not one of my more glorious moments. When I heard that thump my first instinct was to go hunting. But I had no phaser, neither did Kathryn, and it just wasn’t smart. So we had to call in the guys with guns and go hide in the corner while they took care of it for us.”

“Funny, when I heard a thump in the night, my first instinct was to run, not go hunting.” Of course, in the end she had gone hunting, and had bagged her prey after all, but Alison wasn’t about to share that information. No matter how great a story it was, the memory of the look in Elise’s eyes while Tuvok was healing her nose kept her from saying a word. She hadn’t been able to get it out of her mind.

“Go with that instinct,” said Lynne. “It’s the right one. Tuvok was pretty impressed with you, by the way.”

“He was?”

“He said you showed admirable courage and resourcefulness. His exact words. And coming from Tuvok, that’s extremely high praise.”

“Oh.” Alison felt a glow of pride out of all proportion to the compliment. “Well, thank you for sharing it. So, what happened to the kitten? Did it live?”
He made it through the night, which Revi said was the critical part. To my eternal gratitude, Gretchen agreed to take care of him this morning. She's taking him to her vet for a more thorough checkup, and any injections he might need. Revi said he almost certainly needed to have his chemical system rebalanced, but she wasn't about to try to calculate dosages.”

“Handy to have a doctor in the house, even if kittens aren't her specialty.”

“Tell me about it. She showed me how to feed him, and we got his belly full last night. Then everyone in the house magically vanished when it was time to induce him to go to the bathroom. Revi said she figured I could handle that on my own. Kathryn ran so far that I'm not even sure she stayed in the northern hemisphere.”

Alison tried not to laugh at the aggrieved tone in Lynne’s voice, but it was impossible. “Well, you are the mom now. That comes with the territory.”

“At least I only have a week of it. Four weeks is when kittens can be introduced to a litterbox. Believe me, I’m planning to jump on that one right away.”

“I do hate to ask, but...how exactly are you going to teach him to use it?”

“Good question,” said Lynne grimly.

This time Alison managed to stifle her snicker, though she was thoroughly enjoying the image of Lynne, who could be so intimidating, being rendered helpless by a tiny kitten. “It sounds to me like you're in this for the long haul.”

“I guess so. It was either that or hand him over to be euthanized. And there is no way I'm doing that. I've ki—I mean, I've just been around too much death lately. It's nice to be helping a life along instead.”

“Well, that is one lucky kitten to have found himself in your hands, then.”

“Thank you. I just hope the little guy makes it.”

Alison nodded in agreement, having no idea what else to say. Lynne's attempt to cover her slip of the tongue hadn't been nearly good enough, and suddenly she was newly aware of the blood this woman had on her hands. Three Cardassians, most likely, and how many others? She glanced over surreptitiously, trying to reconcile this concept with the cool and
professional appearance Lynne was now projecting. It was impossible. Nor was she capable of understanding what it would take to kill, or to handle the guilt afterwards. Hell, she’d been horrified at what she’d done to Elise, and that was just a bloody nose. She still felt guilty about it.

Actually, she mused, that wasn’t really what she felt guilty about. Once again she remembered the look Elise had given her, and felt the same pang now that she had then. As a woman whose career depended partly on appearances and attitude, she understood exactly what Elise had lost that night. Except that she hadn’t lost it—Alison had taken it from her. And it changed the dynamic between them.

When she’d dropped Elise off at her doorstep and was then asked to wait, she’d been sure she knew what the other woman was going to say. A quiet, dignified request that Alison would please keep the evening’s events to herself; an appeal to her better nature as a fellow professional who understood that public damage to an image constructed over a lifetime could never be fully overcome.

But Elise hadn’t said any of that. She’d apologized instead. It was doubly unexpected, and Alison was afraid that her surprise had made her less gracious than she should have been. That bothered her, too.

“Is that it?” asked Lynne, jarring her out of her thoughts. Alison followed her pointing finger to see the distinctive dome of the Presidential Office of the United Federation of Planets rising above the ancient architecture of the surrounding city.

“That’s it. Looks a bit out of place, doesn’t it?”

“Well, it looks impressive, that’s for sure. I’m guessing that was the point.” Lynne stopped walking and spun in a slow circle. “I can’t believe that Paris is still so familiar. I keep thinking that everything should be different.”

“Well, it has only been three hundred and seventy-seven years.”

Lynne looked at her sharply, then relaxed into a smile. “True. Not so much time after all, I guess. It all depends on how you look at it.”

The walk down the main boulevard toward the Presidential Office was indeed impressive. Alison had done it often enough to become slightly blasé about it, but today she was seeing it through Lynne’s eyes. The soaring entry arch, the double line of enormous oak trees—planted after the third world war, she knew, to symbolize strength and renewal—the long, low wall depicting the events leading up to the creation of the
United Federation of Planets…it really was a beautiful place, despite the crush of tourists from all over the quadrant.

“What a crowd,” said Lynne, watching a school group of Andorian children as they chattered excitedly. “Okay, Paris may not seem that different at first glance, but we never had tourists like these in my century. Now that would have changed the world.”

“That’s what did change the world,” said Alison.

“I know. It’s funny, my parents and I used to talk about that sometimes, when we’d read about the latest wars in the papers. It just seemed like humanity hadn’t improved one iota in its entire existence—our basic violent nature never evolved into something better. We just made better weapons. And we’d joke that the only thing that could possibly stop humans from trying to kill each other was if aliens landed on the planet and we suddenly realized that we weren’t the only kids in the playground.”

“I just wish that all the other kids in the playground were as enlightened,” said Alison. “The Dominion War was a true wake-up call for us. I think we’d gotten a bit complacent about peace in the quadrant, and forgot how fragile it really is.”

They walked up the steps to the huge entrance of the dome and passed through its doors into the security antechamber. As registered visitors, they were able to bypass the tourist lines and go straight to the business entrance.

“Alison Necheyev and Lynne Hamilton,” said Alison to the guard behind the desk. “We have a six o’clock appointment with the President.”

He checked his PADD, nodded, and gestured toward the thumbprint pad attached to the front of the desk. “Please verify your identity.”

Alison pressed her thumb to the pad, waited for the green light, and stepped back to give Lynne room.

“Very good,” said the guard as the light flashed green a second time. “Please step forward to the security transport. No weapons of any kind are allowed in the dome. If you’re carrying energy weapons, they will be deactivated upon transport. Non-energy weapons will be detected and removed from the transport buffer. If weapons are detected in transport, you will be apprehended upon rematerialization. Do you have any weapons to declare?”

“No,” said Alison, who had waited patiently through the familiar
speech. She wondered how many times this poor guard had to repeat it every day.

Lynne bent over, pulled her pant leg up, and withdrew a wicked-looking knife from her boot. As Alison gaped in astonishment, she produced a second knife from her other boot, straightened and said, “I’ll get these back when we come out again, right?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the guard. “They’ll be registered under your name, and your thumbprint will be required to retrieve them.”

“Good.” Lynne set the knives on his desk. “Because these mean a lot to me.”

“I understand.” The guard picked one up, turned it over, and smiled at her. “Vulcan design?”

She nodded. “They were a gift from my savensu.”

Alison could see his respect climbing up a notch. “We’ll take good care of them for you.”

“Thank you.”

Alison went through the security transport first, then waited for Lynne. The moment they were out of earshot of the interior guards, she said, “Do you always go around with giant knives in your boots?”

“Those aren’t giant. Remind me to show you a Klingon battle dagger someday. But yes, I do.”

“Jesus.” Alison faced forward again.

“Does that bother you?”

“I don’t know.”

Lynne reached out and pulled her gently to a stop. “I think you do.”

Alison looked up at her, a spark of anger pooling at the base of her stomach. “Were you carrying those knives when you came into my house and accused me of betraying you?”

After a small pause, Lynne nodded, the regret clearly etched in her face. “I’m sorry. If I could take that back, I would, believe me.”

“Take what back? Intimidating the shit out of me, or carrying weapons into my house?”

Lynne looked around at the people streaming past them on both sides, then took Alison’s arm again and guided her to a more private space near the wall of the lobby. “I would take back the way I treated you, because you didn’t deserve it,” she said quietly. “But I will not apologize for carrying weapons, not into your house or any other place. Without them,
both Kathryn and I would be dead right now. I’m sorry that it bothers you. If I let myself think about it, it bothers the hell out of me too. But this is how I have to live.”

Alison couldn’t get past the thought of those knives, and how angry Lynne had been in her living room. “If I hadn’t convinced you that it wasn’t me, would you have killed me?” she asked bluntly.

Lynne’s eyes filled with tears. “God, Alison.” She turned and walked away, leaving Alison looking after her in confusion. After a moment she jogged to catch up, and they walked together in silence. Though Alison’s mind was buzzing, she didn’t know what to say. She wasn’t even sure how she felt. And this probably wasn’t the best time to get into it, since they were supposed to be meeting Gutierrez in half an hour.

“The coffee shop is over here,” she said, when it became obvious that Lynne was paying no attention to the signs.

Lynne changed direction without a word. Her face was completely shut down, and Alison felt her anger draining away. Part of her wanted to apologize for asking such a terrible question, but there was another part that needed to hear the answer. Because clearly it wasn’t a simple ‘no.’ If it had been, Lynne would have said it. Wouldn’t she?

The silence between them remained unbroken as they moved through the order line. Lynne’s voice was subdued as she asked for a hot chocolate, and Alison doubled her usual espresso order. It might be early evening here, but it was still morning back home and she really needed the pick-me-up. Maybe the caffeine would help her find a way out of the hole she’d just dug for both of them.

They found a table by the transparent wall and sipped their drinks, gazing out over the parkland that surrounded this part of the dome. Alison racked her brain to think of something to say that wouldn’t either make things worse, or sound completely inane. Nothing was coming to her, and the lack of words between them was getting more strained by the minute.

“I think I’ve killed thirteen people.”

Alison looked over in shock, but Lynne was still watching the scenery. “You’re not sure?” she asked carefully.

“Well, I don’t know for certain that all three of those Cardassians died. But the other ten—yeah, I’m sure about those.” Lynne turned her head and their eyes locked. “The first was fifteen months ago. Some young
guard in a prison where Kathryn was being held. I was part of a team that
was trying to get her out. And just when I found her, here was this guard
shooting at her and Revi.”

Revi was there too? But Alison wasn’t about to interrupt.

“All I could think about was keeping him from killing her. It wasn’t a
stun gun. I jumped him, and we fought for the phaser, and then—” She
shrugged. “It was him or me.” She took a sip from her cup, but her gaze
never wavered. “I had a little crisis of faith after that.”

“Because you felt guilty?” This much she could understand.

“No, because I didn’t feel guilty. Not about that, anyway. And I didn’t
know why. I felt like I’d discovered a monster inside me. But Kathryn
helped me to understand that I’d crossed a line into a whole new place
where normal expectations just don’t work anymore. And it helped that
all of my closest friends understood that place.” A humorless smile
touched her lips. “Amazingly, I managed to go fourteen whole months
after that without killing anybody who pissed me off.”

Alison barely even registered the sarcasm; she was too busy doing the
math. Mother of God. That means…

“Then three weeks ago, Kathryn and I were abducted by a splinter
group on Terellia.”

“The Free Terellians,” Alison whispered, remembering.

“You know about it?”

“Aunt Alynna told me that you and Kathryn had been abducted by Free
Terellia terrorists. And that between the two of you, you killed the abduc-
tors and got away. But you were shot in the fight and you, ah…” It was
oddly difficult to say out loud. “You died.”

Lynne nodded. “Temporarily. I’d have stayed dead if Kathryn hadn’t
gotten me back to Voyager, and if Revi hadn’t been so damn good at what
she does. Did the admiral tell you how many terrorists there were?”

Alison shook her head.

“Eleven. Kathryn killed two of them.” Lynne paused. “I got the
other nine.”

She’d expected that, of course. But hearing the words had the effect of
taking the air from her chest, and she could only stare.

“When I woke up in sickbay and found that I’d killed nine people, I
had another little crisis of faith, as you can imagine. It’s still surreal to
me. I look back on that and I can’t believe it happened. But…” She lifted
her hands, palms up. “It did. And even if I could change my own actions, I
wouldn’t. It’s taken me a little while to figure that out, but Kathryn was
right. I did what I had to. I had no choice. And I’m glad I did it, because
that’s why Kathryn’s in a parade right now instead of a coffin draped in a
Starfleet flag.” She picked up her cup, then put it down again without
taking a drink. “But there’s something you need to know. Of those thir-
ten people, none of them were standing in their living room, unarmed so
far as I knew, and presenting no clear threat to me or anyone else. Yes, I
was angry, and I wanted answers. But I didn’t go to your house to kill you.
Even if you had admitted that you were the one—well, I’d have wished
like hell that you’d give me a reason to hurt you, but that’s it. I’m not a
monster.”

Her voice caught on the last sentence, jarring Alison out of her silence.
“I know you’re not.”

“Do you?”

And just like that, her confusion cleared. She reached out to put a
hand over Lynne’s. “Yes. I’m sorry. It was a stupid question—no, it was,”
she said as Lynne shook her head. “I should have known better. For God’s
sake, you just rescued a kitten.”

With a surprised snort, Lynne said, “That just proves I’m a sucker for
half-dead balls of fuzz.”

“I think you’re a sucker for a lot of things.” Alison was suddenly as
sure of this as of her own name. “And I think anyone who can call you
their friend is damn lucky.”

Looking down at their hands, Lynne said quietly, “Thank you. That
means a lot.”

Alison tightened her grip. “I’d like it if I could call you that.”

Lynne raised her head and smiled. “I’d like that too.”

Alison squeezed again, nodded, and withdrew to pick up her cup.
“Drink up, then. We’ve got ten minutes.”

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TuvoK seT the PADD down on his desk and turned his chair to face the
windows. He’d spent the previous day showing Wiler’s image to Founda-
tion employees and getting nowhere. Nor had his questioning of Charles
Fornay been more than marginally productive. Charles had admitted his
debts but denied any involvement in the murder attempts, and Tuvok simply had no evidence to indicate otherwise. He had also done some further checking on Elise Hamilton, but found nothing to counter his impression that Elise had been genuinely shocked to hear about the attempted sabotage of Voyager.

He rose from the chair and stood, hands clasped behind his back as he absorbed the view. Dr. Necheyev had given him a temporary office in the Foundation building, and he found the spartan furnishings unusually restful for a Human office. The lack of decoration made concentration easier, but he had found that meditating on the view of the distant mountains was even more effective. Now he stared at them, turning his thoughts inward and sifting through the pieces of the puzzle to determine which one he should pick up next. There was no doubt in his mind that the killer would be most easily traced from this end of the chain, but how? What traces might have been left behind?

The beep of an incoming message interrupted his thoughts, and he turned to see the Starfleet emblem flashing on his screen, along with the name of Admiral Alynna Necheyev. Crossing to the desk, he sat down and tapped the console. “Yes, Admiral.”

“Commander, we have Jefferson Wiler in custody. He was picked up in Bloomington, Indiana and transferred here.”

“Bloomington?” Tuvok was surprised the man would go to the one place where local officers were on the highest alert. There was only one logical reason for his presence there. “Then the contract must still be active.”

Necheyev nodded shortly. “He’s not talking, but I believe he was there to assess the security operation at Gretchen Janeway’s farm. It would appear that there is indeed at least one other member of the cell still pursuing the contract.”

“There is no longer anything to be gained financially by Lynne Hamilton’s death,” said Tuvok. “The only remaining motive is revenge for her firing of the managers.”

“I agree. It would appear that we’ve underestimated the instigator of this contract, Commander. He or she is willing to risk discovery to make sure Ms. Hamilton dies.”

Which made this individual a great deal more dangerous. “Do you require my assistance in questioning Mr. Wiler?”
“No. Keep working on that end. I suspect your efforts will yield more useful information than Mr. Wiler.”

Tuvok suspected that she was right. Contract employees of the Obsidian Order did not find it healthy to reveal any information about their employers. Wiler would fear his employers far more than the Federation justice system.

“Understood,” he said. “Have Captain Janeway and Ms. Hamilton been notified of this development?”

“Captain Janeway is in the middle of a parade in New York at the moment. And Ms. Hamilton is in a meeting with the President. I’ll contact both of them as soon as they’re available. In the meantime, I’ve assigned a security detail to the captain. They’re already on the parade route with her, though she doesn’t know it yet.”

“Captain Janeway is not fond of security details,” said Tuvok.

Necheyev almost smiled. “I’m guessing there’s an entire book of unspoken history in that little comment, Commander. But if revenge is the motive, then she could be in as much danger as Ms. Hamilton.”

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KATHRYN’S ARM was tired from the waving. At first she’d felt ridiculous and completely self-conscious waving at all of the people lining the parade route, but as time passed and she absorbed the genuine joy and excitement coming from the crowd, she eased into her role. After all, this wasn’t really about her. It was about the symbol she represented, of a lost ship returning home. After all the ships lost in the Dominion War, and the horrifying numbers of casualties, these people needed something to celebrate. She was willing to be a part of that. God knew she understood the importance of morale boosters in the face of tragedy.

She brushed a few stray pieces of ticker tape off her uniform. They’d been lucky with the weather—it was clear and crisp, but not freezing. The sunshine highlighted the blizzards of paper strips tumbling down from the windows of the buildings, and the image was one that she knew would be splashed on FedComm screens all over the Federation. Which, of course, was exactly what Starfleet wanted. If her privacy hadn’t been thoroughly eradicated before, it was now. She was never going to be able to go anywhere again without being recognized.
As her hovercraft moved smoothly forward, she caught a glimpse of yet another Starfleet security uniform in the crowd. Odd. There were far more than necessary, and she was beginning to have her suspicions as to why. The first thing she was going to do when she had a moment to herself was call Lynne and make sure everything was all right.

When she turned to wave at the people on the other side of the street, her attention was caught by an older woman who stared up at her with a stony expression. Her lack of participation made her stand out in the shouting, exuberant crowd, and as Kathryn watched, the woman withdrew a small box from her coat. Time slowed down as Kathryn tensed, waiting for a threat she sensed but didn’t yet understand. And then the air above the woman shimmered, glowed, and burst into color. A holographic sign, with the same words arranged in a pyramid pattern readable from three different directions. In enormous capital letters it said:

WHAT ABOUT THE ONES YOU LEFT BEHIND?

“Ms. Hamilton, Dr. Necheyev, it’s a pleasure to see you again.” President Gutierrez came around from behind his desk and shook their hands, then gestured toward the couches facing each other over a gleaming antique coffee table. “Please, have a seat. May I offer you anything to drink?”

“No, thank you,” said Lynne. “We’ve already tried out the local coffee shop.”

“Oh, I wish you’d waited. My personal chef makes the best coffee in the quadrant.”

They settled onto the couches, with the President on one and Lynne and Alison on the other. Gutierrez opened the meeting with all the assurance of a man who knew the script. “I was delighted to hear that your identity has been confirmed,” he said, looking at Lynne. “Of course I had no doubt, but the legalities had to be satisfied.”

“Funny, I had no doubt either.”

Alison knew Lynne hadn’t said that for humorous effect, but Gutierrez chose to hear it that way and smiled.

“I was also happy to hear that you’ve already been installed as Co-Vice Chair of the board. Congratulations. That must be quite satisfying, to
know that you’ve finally stepped into the role that your parents left for you.”

“It is, thank you. And a tremendous responsibility. Fortunately, I’ve got an excellent instructor teaching me the ropes.” Lynne looked at Alison, leaving no doubt as to who the instructor was. Gutierrez beamed at her as well.

“I imagine you’ve been kept busy, between working with Ms. Hamilton and redirecting the Foundation’s mission.”

“Working with Ms. Hamilton has been a privilege,” said Alison, deliberately not answering the second part of his probe for information. “I think she’s going to be a tremendous asset to the Foundation.”

“Thanks, Alison.” Lynne gave her a quick smile, then looked at Gutierrez. “But the Foundation’s mission hasn’t been redirected.”

He managed to keep his friendly expression in place, but it looked a bit strained. “Really? Is there still an issue with your authority?”

“No, not at all. I just haven’t decided that redirecting the mission is the best thing for everyone concerned.”

“Ms. Hamilton.” He leaned forward, his tone slightly patronizing. “Believe me when I say that it is the best thing for everyone concerned. The Hamilton Foundation and the Federation have had a close relationship for hundreds of years, and the society you see on Earth today—and in the other planets of this Federation—is due in no small part to that relationship. Hamilton Foundation resources have enabled the Federation to focus its own resources on social issues, environmental reclamation and conservation, medical research, defense, and technical research of every kind. Your Foundation has given the Federation an advantage over every other major power in two quadrants by enabling it to conserve resources that would otherwise be spent on developing technologies of space exploration. But the Dominion War has been extremely costly in every way, and we are nowhere near the point of being fully rebuilt. The loss of Foundation resources now, of all times, is truly crippling.”

Lynne eyed him. “Didn’t you just congratulate me on my installation as Co-Vice Chair of the Hamilton Foundation Board?”

Taken aback, he said, “Yes, I did.”

“Then why are you sitting there and giving me a remedial lecture on my own Foundation? Do you really think I don’t know the most basic details about the organization I’m taking over?”
Alison pressed her lips together to hold back the smile. No doubt Gutierrez had never been spoken to like that in his entire presidency, and he wasn’t doing a very good job at hiding his surprise.

“I do apologize,” he said, recovering. “I assumed that since you haven’t decided about the mission, perhaps you didn’t fully understand its import.”

“Of course I understand its import. I understand a few more things, too. I understand that you’re up for re-election next year, and that losing the Foundation’s resources looks pretty bad on your political resumé. I also understand that your desire to recover those resources led you to a game of brinksmanship with my wife that put the lives of one hundred and forty-eight people at risk.”

Whoa, thought Alison. She took off the gloves early.

Gutierrez looked at her, recognized an open antagonist, and traded his patronizing tone for a condescending one. “With all due respect, you’re new at this and I’m afraid you’re in over your head. My decision to order the use of the slipstream drive was based on a clear assessment of the risks and benefits. It was my considered opinion that the benefits of getting you home, and getting that policy reversed, was worth a risk that frankly was overstated.”

“Who gave you that advice? Because it was not in your best interests.”

His mouth tightened. “I receive advice from a number of qualified people. My decisions are my own.”

“I see. So you would honestly assess a fifteen percent chance of survival as an overstated risk?”

“Ms. Hamilton, please consider the possibility that the risk factor you quote might not have been accurate. My own sources quoted me a very different factor.”

“The risk factor I’m quoting came from the senior officers of Voyager, and more specifically the people who built that drive. Where did yours come from? Lieutenant Harry Kim?”

The bolt went home, though Gutierrez showed it only by a very slight narrowing of his eyes. “I am not in the habit of discussing the opinions of my advisors once my decision has been made. If I did that, this government would grind to a standstill.”

“That’s all right,” said Lynne easily. “You already discussed it. With my wife, when you used Harry’s opinion as a reason why she should use the
slipstream drive. An opinion that Harry gave in a *private* message to his parents. So you intercepted a private message—is that even legal?—and then used a lieutenant’s unofficial opinion as a reason to overrule a captain’s decision. You know, I don’t think I’m the one who needs remedial lessons here.”

Gutierrez was clearly taken aback by her attitude, and even Alison was a bit startled. Lynne wasn’t making the slightest pretense toward diplomacy, and the President didn’t quite know how to address it. He wasn’t accustomed to dealing with people who didn’t even try to play the game.

“ ‘I can understand why you would see this situation from an emotional standpoint,’” he said, trying another tack. “ ‘You’re very close to it, both as the wife of Captain Janeway and as a member of Voyager’s crew. But you must understand that I can’t afford to be emotional. I can’t afford to think in smaller terms. I have to consider the best interests of the Federation, and sometimes that comes into conflict with the best interests of individuals. It’s the burden of government.’”

“I agree with you,” Lynne said, throwing him off balance. “ ‘It’s the burden of command, too. I’ve seen Kathryn struggle with just those kinds of decisions.’”

“Yes, of course you have.” Alison could hear a thread of relief in his voice.

“ ‘Except that Kathryn would never, ever factor her own personal interests into such a decision.’”

His eyes widened. “ ‘If you are suggesting that I made—’”

“I’m not suggesting it. I know it. Come on, Mr. President, let’s stop dancing around it, shall we? You and I both know that you needed Voyager back here now, not next year or the year after. We were already more than halfway home, and the added input from the Foundation’s resources were almost certainly going to bear fruit in a short time. But that time wasn’t short enough for you. Not for the Federation, you. So you chose to ignore the facts that you didn’t like, and gave an order that you felt was politically expedient. Except that you essentially ordered Kathryn to commit suicide and take her ship and her entire crew with her. And then you threatened her with a court-martial for having the guts to refuse.” She leaned forward. “ ‘When you were calculating your chances, didn’t it occur to you that Captain Janeway’s wife might just be angry enough at your indecent behavior to decide she wouldn’t give you what you wanted?’”
“No,” he said. “Because it never occurred to me that you would put a personal vendetta before the best interests of your world and the entire Federation—not to mention your wife’s career.”

“Ah, here we go.” Lynne sat back again. “I play nice and Kathryn gets her admiral’s bars, is that it?”

He inclined his head. “As I said before, you’re new at this. Politics is not about valiant stands and unilateral decisions for all that’s right and good. It’s a business of compromise. It’s people and nations and entire planets who don’t like each other setting their differences aside and agreeing to compromises that give everyone some part of what they want. Not all of it, but part of it. I’m sure that you and I can find just such a compromise.”

“The art of the possible,” said Lynne. “That’s what we called it. So, I’m glad to know where you stand. Except you forgot the other part of our compromise—the Maquis amnesty.”

“That is an extremely delicate issue.” He didn’t seem at all surprised that she’d brought it up.

“Of course it is, which is why nothing’s been done on it for months. But Voyager is home now, and there’s a significant part of her crew sitting in legal limbo because the politicians can’t decide what to do with them. Don’t you think it’s time to take care of that?”

“That’s not my decision, Ms. Hamilton. The Maquis issue is in the hands of the Federation Council.”

“My mistake,” said Lynne silkily. “I thought the President of the Federation might have some influence with the Council.”

He shifted on the couch, deliberately assuming a more relaxed pose. “My office does have some influence, should I choose to use it. Though of course I can never guarantee that a majority of the Council will follow my recommendation on any particular issue, especially one so delicate as this.”

Alison looked back and forth between them, marveling at how the discussion had slid right into a classic political negotiation. Gutierrez was clearly feeling in his element as well.

Now Lynne was shaking her head. “Not good enough. You talk about compromise, but you’re offering very little. I’m holding your political future in my hands, Mr. President. Isn’t that worth a few chats with Council members? Calling in a few favors, perhaps? And then you can
spin the result as a mark of your own vision for post-war unity. *Voyager* finally comes home, and the President nudges a stalemated Council into declaring amnesty for the Maquis members of its crew. The men and women who forged the ultimate compromise, giving up their own ship and potentially their freedom in order to work together with a Starfleet crew toward a common goal. What a perfect symbol for the rebuilding of the Federation.”

“You paint a compelling picture.”

“It’s compelling because it’s the truth. Or at least, the part about the heroism and self-sacrifice of the Maquis is true. The part about the President’s role in saving them...that’s up to you. Now, I’m not a politician, but it does seem like an excellent opportunity, doesn’t it? Pushing a winning narrative must be so much easier when the truth of it is obvious to everyone. And especially when the average voter wants to believe it. I can’t imagine that any of your opponents would have a narrative to compare to it.”

He smiled. “*Voyager* and her crew certainly have captured the public’s imagination. In fact I was just watching the news before you arrived, and it seems as if every network is covering your wife’s parade tonight. She must be very proud.”

“She’s extremely proud of her crew. Her only regret is that they’re not in that parade with her.”

“I can imagine. It’s a shame, really. Under normal circumstances, her senior staff *should* have been in the parade with her, but this Maquis situation...” He made a regretful sound. “It does make things awkward when the legal status of the first officer and chief engineer are in doubt. It would have been my preference for this situation to have been resolved before *Voyager*’s return. These days the Federation can use all the heroes it can get.”

Lynne nodded. “Because it’s not just the economic and infrastructure base you’re having to rebuild, is it? It’s also the morale of an entire quadrant.”

“Yes, precisely. And in some ways that is so much more difficult.”

The conversation shifted to the rebuilding efforts in the Federation, with the President doing most of the talking as he outlined all that his administration had accomplished. Alison recognized quite a few of his phrases from previous speeches and press releases; this was just mindless
filler for him. The meat of the negotiation was done, and unless her political sense was way off, he’d already made his decision. She listened to Lynne being polite and smiled inwardly. Had Lynne been experienced enough to realize that the negotiation had ended ten minutes ago, she probably would have cut off the conversation in some spectacularly rude manner. Yet here she was, playing the game in spite of herself.

After extolling the technological advances of the three new ships Voyager’s crew had seen in the Utopia Planitia shipyards—a subtle reminder of what Captain Janeway might aspire to if Lynne played her role properly, Alison thought—Gutierrez looked at the massive grandfather clock tucked into a corner of his office. “Do you know, I haven’t yet had my own coffee this evening. Are you sure you wouldn’t like anything? I’d recommend it.”

“No, thank you.”

“Dr. Necheyev?”

“Thank you, but I already had a double espresso. Any more and I’ll be levitating.”

He chuckled. “Well, I hope you won’t mind if I drink without you. I’ll just be a moment.” He rose and exited through a side door, leaving them alone with the slow ticking of the grandfather clock.

“He doesn’t have to get his own coffee—normally he’d call to have it brought in,” whispered Alison into Lynne’s ear. “He’s using this time to make his decision look like he’s thought about it. You’ve got him; there’s no way he’ll turn you down. It’s a win-win situation for him.”

Lynne nodded, and Alison leaned back in to add, “Nicely done. Where did you learn to negotiate like that?”

“I was Kathryn’s personal security escort,” she whispered back. “That means I spent hours watching her do just this kind of crap. And she’d bounce her strategies off me beforehand, just to hear how they sounded. Never, ever get into a bargaining session with Kathryn. She’ll walk off with the clothes on your back.” A pained look crossed her face. “But I did forget her cardinal rule.”

“What’s that?”

“Never drink before a negotiation.”

Alison snorted with suppressed laughter. “You poor thing.”

The clock counted off two more minutes before the door opened and Gutierrez walked back in with a silver tray. Setting it on the table, he sat
down and gestured toward the plate on the tray. “I brought a few of the chef’s homemade cookies while I was at it. Give them a try, they’re excellent.”

“They are good,” said Alison, picking up a napkin and a cookie. “I’ve had them before, and I can recommend them.”

“You haven’t steered me wrong yet.” Lynne took a cookie for herself, and Gutierrez smiled at them over the rim of his coffee cup.

“You won’t be sorry,” he said. “Now, Ms. Hamilton, regarding what we were discussing earlier—in truth I always felt amnesty was appropriate. The issue with the Maquis is that legally, their actions were treason. You can imagine that these days, so soon after a devastating war, the concept of treason tends to be an extremely hot issue.”

“Yes, I can,” said Lynne. “You’re right, it is a good cookie.”

He smiled again. “Chef Sendax is one of the perks of the office. But as I was saying, the Maquis on Voyager are a special case. In essence they’ve already served a seven-year sentence. In addition, they’ve proven their loyalty to Federation ideals and principles by virtue of their performance under Captain Janeway’s command. I’ve viewed her recommendation for their amnesty; she’s very eloquent in her praise. And of course, there is the matter that the Maquis were actually prescient in their vision of the true nature of Cardassian territorial expansion. The treaty they violated was broken by the Cardassians themselves only a few years later.”

“I agree,” said Lynne. “Surely the Council can be encouraged to see the advantages of your point of view.”

“I believe that it can, and I’m willing to put the resources of this office into that pursuit.” He sipped again, then set his cup down on the tray. “It also occurs to me that perhaps I owe Captain Janeway a favor after the difficult position I was forced to place her in. Once again, I have no actual power with Starfleet, but I can certainly issue a recommendation toward her promotion.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Excuse me?” His smooth flow had been interrupted, and it took him a moment to recover. “You don’t want that recommendation?”

“What I don’t want is for Kathryn’s career to be any part of our agreement. That was your offer, not my request, and I’m taking it off the table. Kathryn wouldn’t want a promotion based on anything but her performance and her qualifications. I would prefer that the President’s Office
stay completely out of it—neither helping nor hindering. And that means removing all mention of your request for court-martial from her records.”

“I see. Well then, I’ll withdraw that offer since that’s your preference, and the issue of Captain Janeway’s service record is an easy one to rectify. Then we have come to a compromise, have we not? I think the Federation Council can be encouraged to vote on the Maquis amnesty within the next week. And it will be a great pleasure to announce both the amnesty and a return of Foundation funding.”

“The return of Foundation funding? Oh, but I haven’t decided on that yet. As I told you, I’m still considering the alternatives.”

Gutierrez couldn’t have been any more surprised than Alison, who looked at Lynne in utter bewilderment. What in the name of God did she think she was doing?

“I’m afraid I don’t understand,” said Gutierrez. “What were we discussing if not the reversal of that policy?”

Lynne’s smile was predatory. “We were discussing your political future, Mr. President. You’ll recall that I said I held it in my hands. Our deal is that you’ll arrange the Maquis amnesty, and get your dirty fingerprints out of Kathryn’s service record, and in exchange I won’t put an end to your career.”

He frowned. “That is not what we were discussing. Nor do you have the power to act on that threat.”

“Then I think it’s time for your remedial lecture. So let me make this very simple for you.” Lynne dropped the remainder of her cookie on the tray. “When I said that your decision to force Kathryn to use the slipstream drive was not in your best interests, I meant that quite literally. The day you tried to destroy my wife is the day you made a lifelong enemy of me. I don’t take kindly to self-important assholes fucking with the woman I love, and it just so happens that I’m now a very, very wealthy woman. I’m quite willing to put every bit of my personal fortune into buying a deep hole to drop your career into. I’ll also be happy to advertise the true reason why the Federation lost every bit of the Hamilton Foundation funding on your watch, and I’ll make it clear that whoever runs against you should come talk to me about renewing that funding next year. And I will spend every minute of my time making sure that the highest elected office you ever see from now on will be head of a wastewater district. It will be an absolute pleasure, believe me.”
Both Alison and Gutierrez were staring at her with slack jaws. Alison was the first to recover, and in solidarity she placed the remainder of her own cookie on the tray as well. She folded her hands in her lap and watched Gutierrez, waiting for his response.

“I think perhaps you’ve allowed your emotions to affect your judgment,” he said at last. “Your anger is understandable, and I accept that you have cause for it. But this is not a solution. You’re gravely underestimating my own power. You’ve just arrived on the scene, Ms. Hamilton, but I’m the President of the United Federation of Planets. I didn’t get here by not knowing how to defend myself. You aren’t the first person to hold a grudge against me, and you certainly won’t be the last. But I would be dismayed if I were forced to act against you. We’re much better off as a team, and you would be far better served by having me as a friend than an enemy. Think carefully before you do anything you’ll regret. If I’m attacked, I’ll make sure you’re investigated and pilloried in a very public manner. Your name is news right now, but you have no idea how fast the news cycle turns and how quickly public admiration can turn to contempt. Your reputation, nascent as it is, can be easily destroyed and you would find it very difficult to get your own accusations publicized. You’re too new on the scene to have built up any credibility, and no amount of money can buy the kind of connections and abilities that I already hold.”

His expression, which had been disarmingly open, now hardened as he drove his point home. “And it would be such a pity if any misguided actions on your part spilled over onto your wife. I hear she’s accomplished some remarkable things in the Delta Quadrant, but she also made some very questionable and possibly actionable decisions. The line between a promotion and a demotion can sometimes be rather thin. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Clearly.” Lynne’s jaw was tight.

Gutierrez nodded. “Don’t try to play this game with me. You will not win. Now, you already have a good offer on the table. Take it and count yourself fortunate that I’m willing to forget what you’ve just tried to do.”

Alison watched Lynne, praying that she’d get control of the anger that was positively radiating from her. Gutierrez had known exactly which button to push. Not surprising, since she’d freely told him of her greatest vulnerability. She’d practically given him the knife to stab her with.
And then, suddenly, Lynne relaxed. The transformation was eerie, and a glance at Gutierrez confirmed that he’d been thrown by it as well.

“It’s interesting that you should mention such things as investigation and the public destruction of a reputation,” said Lynne in a conversational tone. “So you obviously understand the stakes should any unsavory little details from your past come under close scrutiny. I may be underestimating your power, but you’re underestimating how new I am on the scene. You’re familiar with the concept of the Borg collective mind, aren’t you?”

He drew his brows together in confusion. “I don’t see what that has—”

“It has everything to do with it. In the Delta Quadrant I was assimilated by the Borg. I spent three days as a part of the Collective, and I still carry a few souvenirs. Once the Borg take you, you’re never fully Human again. It’s impossible to get all the implants out. This arm, for instance.” She held her right hand in front of her and looked at it reflectively. “You’d never think it wasn’t real, would you?” Reaching out, she took a corner of the silver tray and effortlessly bent it upward. As Gutierrez gaped, she said, “It’s generally not wise to judge by appearances. Now, another one of my implants is here.” She tapped her head. “It’s called a cortical implant, and it’s essentially a computerized repository of the Collective’s entire knowledge base. You would be amazed at what’s in here. Personal memories are the most astonishing things. And the Borg have a lot of personal memories from assimilated Humans. I know the Federation puts the death toll from Wolf 359 at eleven thousand, but I’m sorry to tell you that most of those people didn’t die. They were assimilated. And all those memories are right here in this implant. Not to mention memories from all of the people in the colonies that were destroyed in the second Borg attack, and of course the various random ships that were caught along the way.”

She bent the tray corner back down, leaving it slightly out of alignment. “Now, you’ve talked quite a lot about compromises. I wonder how it would look if some of your more...dishonorable compromises came to light? Or any of your past actions that you’re not entirely proud of, and wouldn’t want the entire Federation to know about? Wouldn’t it be just amazing if the Borg Collective happened to have, in all of those thousands
of lives’ worth of memories, a few memories from someone who knew what you’d done?”

Gutierrez went pale as she leaned further forward, her eyes intent on his. “You’re the President of the United Federation of Planets. The single most important political figure in the Federation. The Borg knew that, which meant that any information about you was of great interest to them. They kept it all. So I may be new on the scene, but my knowledge is not. I know far more about you than you can imagine, and more than you would ever wish. I also know a few reporters who would be delighted to have another interview with me. Take my offer, Mr. President. And count yourself fortunate that I’m even willing to do that much. Because believe me, destroying your career is still tempting, and I’d do it in a heartbeat if you didn’t happen to have one thing that I want. The Maquis amnesty is the only thing holding me back. So as much as it pains me, I’m willing to forget what I know, and let you keep your reputation. Take care of that amnesty in the week that you just said was possible, clean up Kathryn’s record, and I’ll leave you to your own fortunes.”

In the silence that fell over the room, the ticking of the grandfather clock seemed extraordinarily loud. Lynne never took her eyes off Gutierrez, and judging by his expression, she had shaken his confidence. At last he cleared his throat and said, “If I make that recommendation, do I have your word that I will never hear of you or from you again, in any capacity related to this discussion?”

“Your recommendation isn’t good enough. I want the full weight of your office behind the amnesty. Get that approved next week and then yes, you have my word.”

He nodded. “Then our business is concluded.”

“Good.” Lynne rose immediately, with Alison following suit. “Oh, and one more thing,” she said. “If I ever have reason to suspect interference from you or this office in my wife’s career, this deal is off.”

“Yes, yes,” he said impatiently. “There’s no need for that. I’m not a stupid man.”

“Thank you for meeting with us, Mr. President.” She held out her right hand with a perfectly straight face. Gutierrez hesitated, then reached out and shook it. He was still looking at the tray when they let themselves out.
It wasn’t until after Lynne had collected her knives and they’d walked into the open air that Alison felt it was safe to say what was on her mind.

“What in the hell was that? You took a big chance in there! He gave you what you wanted right from the beginning; why didn’t you just take his first offer?”

“Because he’d have gotten what he wanted in return. That wasn’t good enough. I want that bastard to know that he made a huge fucking mistake and that I’m not letting him get away with it. Maybe he’ll think twice about doing something that shitty in the future. But probably not.”

“You took that chance just because you were pissed?”

“I took that chance because it was the best legal alternative to what I really wanted to do to him.”

*And to think I believed Kathryn was the one doing the protecting.* “Well, you had me scared. I thought he was going to eat you for lunch. Whatever you’ve got on him, it must be good.”

“That would be a coincidence, wouldn’t it? If my Collective memories actually included dirt on the one person I needed it for?”

Alison stopped in her surprise, then hurried a few paces to catch up. “Did I just hear you say that you *bluffed* the President?”

Lynne looked like a Russian who had just figured out how to turn water into vodka. “Like I told you, I’ve learned a few things from Kathryn. Everyone has their secrets.”

“Sweet Jesus on the cross!” Alison wanted to pull her hair out. “I can’t believe it! You’re completely insane!”

“I’ve heard that before. And you swear like a Catholic sailor. It’s really surprising, coming from you.”

Alison was speechless for one of the few times in her life.

—

“Thank you,” said Tuvok, accepting the PADD from a Foundation researcher. He’d requested a copy of the Foundation’s own final report on the slipstream drive, and it had been delivered to his office with admirable efficiency. After copying the file into his personal PADD, he ran a textual comparison of the original with the version that Voyager had received via the MIDAS array. As expected, there were no differences. He reset the display of his PADD to show Voyager’s file, then laid the Foundation
PADD next to it on his desk and began a line by line comparison of the data blocks. It was a long shot, but perhaps whoever had slipped the mousetrap into this report had left digital tracks. Of course the Starfleet engineers on Admiral Paris’ team had already been through this with a fine-toothed comb, but Tuvok preferred not to eliminate potential leads from his investigation until he had personally seen and dismissed them.

After thirty minutes he assessed his progress and mentally crossed everything else off his schedule. This was going to take all day.

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By the time Kathryn reached the studio for her post-parade interview, the press had already identified the woman in the crowd as Susanna Martin. Her son, Ensign Joseph Martin, had been killed on Voyager during their third year in the Delta Quadrant.

Inevitably, the questions from her interviewer turned to Ms. Martin and her sign. “Captain Janeway, in the midst of all the celebrations, Ms. Martin has reminded us that not everyone came home. It must be difficult for the families of those who didn’t return to see so much happiness when they themselves are faced with the ultimate loss. If Ms. Martin were here with us right now, what would you tell her?”

“I’d tell her that I would be grateful for the chance to meet her, in a more comfortable and private place, to talk about her son. Joseph Martin was a good officer and a good man, and his death was a tremendous loss for all of us.” She faced the camera and went completely off the script that had been drilled into her the previous day. “Ms. Martin, if you’re watching this, I’d like to give you a personal invitation. Please contact me. I know I can’t understand the loss of a son, but I understand very well the loss of a family member. Both my father and my first fiancé died in the service of Starfleet. And my crew on Voyager was more than just a crew to me. They became my family as well. When all you have is each other, and very little hope of getting home, the normal relationship between captain and crew changes. The names and faces of every person we lost in the Delta Quadrant are burned into my heart and my memory.

“There are other families who have suffered a similar loss. My invitation extends to them as well. And I think it’s appropriate to take a moment, right now, to honor every single one of those who didn’t share
the joy of seeing familiar stars once more. They are Ensign Lyndsay Ballard. Crewman Kurt Bandera. Ensign Thomas Bennet. Lieutenant Commander Jonathan Cavit. Ensign Claudia Craig. Crewman Frank Darwin. Lieutenant Peter Durst...”

She recited the names and ranks of them all, in alphabetical order because that was the way she’d had them listed in her file. The file that she had opened now and again, in her moments of deepest despair, when she’d felt the need to drive the knife further in and force herself to face the consequences of her decisions and her command. Those moments had come far less often after she’d met Lynne, but she could still see the file in her mind’s eye. When she’d said those names and faces were burned in her memory, it wasn’t an exaggeration.

After the twenty-third name, she turned back to see a look of respect on her interviewer’s face. “In honor of those you have just named,” he said, “we would like to observe one minute of silence.” A moment later he held his finger across his throat, indicating that the cameras were no longer active. Leaning forward, he said quietly, “They’re seeing a panorama of stars right now.”

She nodded, swallowing the tightness in her throat.
Seven stood behind Revi, her hand resting on her shoulder. It’ll be all right.

You can’t make that guarantee.

No, but I can guarantee that I’ll be here with you no matter what she says or what happens.

Revi reached up to cover Seven’s hand, consciously straightened her posture, and tapped the communication console at the living room desk. “Hello, Mother.”

“Revi. It’s good to see you again.” Dhara gave her an uncertain smile.

“How are you?”

“Nervous,” said Revi truthfully. “What did you decide?”

“You thought I would change my mind.” Dhara shook her head. “No. It’s been seven days and I’m calling just as you asked me to. When can we get together and do this?”

“So you’re absolutely certain you want to go through with it.”

“I’m absolutely certain I need to go through with it.”

Revi’s tension eased, but not by much. “All right. In an hour?”

“That would be fine. Just tell me where I should go.”

“I’ll pick you up at the Bloomington, Indiana transport station.”

“Bloomington?” It was clearly the last place she’d expected. “Is that where you’re staying?”
“For now, yes. Captain Janeway’s mother has been very gracious.”
“How kind of her. Will I be meeting her?”

Revi knew her mother well enough to hear the real question. “Yes, you will. I’m afraid you won’t meet Captain Janeway, though. She’s in New York.”

“That’s all right,” said Dhara. “I’m coming to Bloomington for you, not anyone else. So…one hour, then?”

“Yes. And Mother, I need to tell you—Seven will be sharing our link with us.”

Dhara looked past Revi and met Seven’s eyes, her own showing a sudden increase in trepidation. “Oh, I see.”

“No, you don’t,” said Revi. “But you will.”

≈

“Honey, I’m home!”

Gretchen smiled at Lynne’s theatrical entrance. “So you are. And in a good mood, considering the news we’ve all received.”

Lynne shrugged off her overcoat, revealing the sharp black suit she wore beneath it. Pulling a hanger from the hall closet, she said, “It’s not all that surprising to either me or Kathryn. We never believed the danger was over, and we’re not going to believe it until whoever hired those Cardassians is found and put away. That’s why Revi, Seven and I are still wearing our Borg bands.” She hung up the coat and turned back to face Gretchen. “But I do feel bad about you. I’m really sorry that you’ve found yourself in the middle of all this. I’m sure that a twenty-four hour security detail wasn’t anything you envisioned when you were looking forward to our homecoming.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t anything you envisioned, either.” Gretchen didn’t know how Lynne could be so calm about it. She’d called from Paris to tell Gretchen not to bother picking her up at the transport station, since by Admiral Necheyev’s advice she’d just added two security guards to the team and would be escorted home by them. Until further notice, she said, she’d be accompanied by two guards every time she left the house.

“Well, no, I can’t say that it was. But I also can’t get too upset about it when it’s my fault they’re necessary. I’m just upset about it for you.”
Gretchen shook her head. “You’re not responsible for someone else’s utter lack of decency.”

“True, but I made myself the target. No, it’s okay,” she said as Gretchen tried to speak. “I’m not going down the self-blame road again. I’m just trying to deal with the facts. So, where’s my little buddy?”

Accepting the subject change, Gretchen answered, “He’s in the kitchen. Come to think of it, you’re just in time for a feeding.”

Lynne’s face lit up. “Am I? Good. I was looking forward to that.” She started toward the kitchen, but came to a stop at the end of Gretchen’s outstretched hand. “What?”

“You are going to go upstairs and change out of that suit first. That’s a meet-the-President suit, not a feed-the-orphan-kitten suit. And then I want to hear all about your meeting.”

Lynne grinned. “Deal. And I get to hear all about the vet visit.”

She was downstairs again in a minute and a half, by which time Gretchen had already replicated the formula in its bottle. With a smile, Lynne took it from her and sat cross-legged on the floor by the kitten’s box. “Hi, little guy,” she murmured as she lifted him out on his heating pad. “Did you miss me?”

The kitten squirmed as his sleep was disturbed, then opened soft blue eyes and looked around. When Lynne offered the bottle he latched on with alacrity, closing his eyes and sucking busily.

“Good stuff, huh? My god, you’re cute. I bet the vet loved you.” She looked up. “So what did he say?”

Gretchen pulled out a chair and sat down, thoroughly enjoying the sight of Lynne’s hands full of kitten and bottle. “Well, our little guest isn’t feral after all.”

“He isn’t?”

“No, Dr. Landross said that feral cats have natural reproductive cycles tuned to the availability of food, and there’s nothing natural about giving birth in the middle of an Indiana winter.”

“Oh, that makes sense. I should have thought of that. So much for my biology background.”

“Which means someone bred the mother cat intentionally, and then lost her somehow. Dr. Landross said he’d ask around, but he hasn’t heard any reports of a lost cat. So it seems likely that whoever the owner was is either not too worried about it or lost her on purpose.”
“Bastard.”

“Also, he has no fleas—one benefit to being born in the winter—and after a few injections, he’s now properly tuned up and ready to go. Dr. Landross aged him at just under four weeks. He said you could start weaning him in three or four days in theory, but he’d recommend another ten days, given the rough start. In a week you can offer him solid food just to see how he feels about it.”

“Okay. I can do ten days. Thank you so much for taking care of him.” Lynne looked down at her charge. “You look a lot better. Check out your fat little belly!”

Gretchen smiled. “Have you thought of a name yet?”

“Um…yes, but I’m not sure Kathryn will like it.”

“Who cares what Kathryn thinks? Is she taking care of this kitten, or are you?”

“Good point. I didn’t see her anywhere in sight when the shit hit the fan, so to speak. Well, I was thinking Barney.”

“Barney,” repeated Gretchen. “Was that a common cat name in your century?”

Laughing, Lynne said, “No. At least I don’t think so. It was a name for men, and kind of old-fashioned even then. But, given where he was found…”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Gretchen laughed too. “I like it.”

“Do you? All right then, it’s settled.”

Barney was fed, burped, induced to ‘do his business,’ as Lynne put it, and tidied up afterwards. Gretchen watched the process with a well-hidden sense of delight. She wasn’t about to say anything, but it was obvious to her that Barney already had his rescuer wrapped around his tiny paw, and nothing could have been better for Lynne’s psyche. Last night Kathryn had worried aloud about the difficulty of adding any more complications to Lynne’s already overwhelming load, but Gretchen had told her that this, at least, was a complication that might bear fruit. “That kitten needs her,” she’d said, “but I think she needs him even more.”

Once Lynne had Barney happily ensconced in his box, Gretchen listened in open astonishment to the story of her meeting with the President. “It’s a good thing you didn’t tell me what you’d planned to do,” she said. “I’d have strongly advised you against it. Actually I would have thought you were out of your mind.”
“Alison was horrified. You should have seen the look on her face when I threw Gutierrez’ offer back on the table. And then when she found out that I bluffed him—” Lynne chuckled at the memory. “She’s so cool and professional, but when she’s surprised, the real Alison comes out in full color.”

“I don’t imagine she’s surprised very often.”

“No, I don’t think so either. It’s funny, when I first met her she scared me to death. She was so intimidating! But now I like her quite a lot. First impressions can be so deceiving.”

“Not always,” said Gretchen. “My first impression of you was pretty good.”

Lynne smiled at her. “That was definitely mutual. Anyway, we should have some very good news in a week, and then I’m going to throw a huge party for the Maquis and any of our crew who are still in range and want to come. A real party, without any dignitaries or stuffy speeches. Just for us.”

They discussed Kathryn’s parade, which Lynne had missed while in Paris, and her interview afterward, which Lynne and Alison had seen while having lunch after their meeting. “It is so strange to be eating lunch when it’s dark outside and everyone else thinks it’s dinnertime,” said Lynne. “This time zone thing is killing me.”

“That’s why most people still choose to live near their place of work, even though they could theoretically live anywhere in the world,” said Gretchen. “Transporters eliminate the distance, but you can’t change the time zones. So tell me, is Kathryn handling the loss of her crew members as well as she seems to be?”

“If you’d asked me that question two years ago, or even one year ago, I’d have said no. But I think she’s better about taking on the guilt of the universe these days.”

“So now she only takes on the guilt of the galaxy?”

“Something like that. But it’s an improvement.”

And how much guilt do you take on? Gretchen wanted to ask. She might even have done it had the shout not erupted from the front of the house.

“Mother!”

“In the kitchen,” Gretchen called.

Phoebe blew into the kitchen with her usual energy and dropped a breathless kiss on her cheek. “Hi! Hey, Lynne! How’s the kitten?”
“See for yourself.” Lynne gestured toward the box. “But don’t you dare wake him up.”

“As if anything could,” said Phoebe, bending over the box. “He’s a baby. Babies sleep through everything. Oh, he’s so cute!”

“He takes after his mom,” said Gretchen, ignoring the look Lynne shot her.

“So he’s going to be all right?”

“Looks like it,” Lynne answered. “As long as I keep up my end.”

Pulling out a chair, Phoebe flopped into it and said, “It’s going to be fun watching Kathryn dealing with a cat.”

Lynne looked from her to Gretchen. “Is there something about Kathryn and cats that I don’t know about?”

“Just that she’s never had one,” said Gretchen. “She’s always preferred dogs.”

“She likes things that she can train.” Phoebe gave Lynne a wicked smile. “And give orders to. Cats aren’t very good at taking orders.”

“No, but neither am I. By now I think she’s used to it.”

“Oh!” Phoebe suddenly remembered. “How did your meeting go?”

“Got everything I wanted. The Federation Council should be announcing the Maquis amnesty by next week.”

“Whoo!” shouted Phoebe, punching her fist into the air.

“Jesus Christ, could you be any louder?” Lynne leaned over to check on the kitten, and Gretchen smothered a smile.

Lowering her voice to an exaggerated whisper, Phoebe said, “You’re amazing! Chakotay will be so happy to hear it.”

“Not yet he won’t. Chakotay isn’t hearing a word about it until it actually happens, and neither is anyone else,” said Lynne. “I don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up just in case something goes wrong.”

“Damn.” Phoebe was crestfallen. “I was looking forward to telling him.”

“I didn’t realize you knew him that well.” Gretchen could not believe what she was seeing, but she recognized the signs.

“We had a great talk at the reception, didn’t I mention that? And then last week he came by my gallery.” She looked at Lynne. “He was actually hoping to see Kathryn and you, but you were in deep dark seclusion and didn’t see fit to tell me where you were. So we had lunch and he spent the afternoon hanging out in my gallery. We talked a lot in between
customers. He’s really a remarkable man. I can see why you and Kathryn thought so highly of him.”

Lynne widened her eyes at Gretchen, who shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“I guess I forgot to tell you that he was looking for you,” Phoebe continued. “Sorry.”

“I don’t think he was looking very hard. We may have been out of touch, but we did get messages. So, is he enjoying Arizona?”

“Oh, you should hear him talk about it! You can see in his eyes how much he loves the canyon country. He showed me some holopictures and you know, I really have no idea why I’ve never gone down there to paint. The colors in the rocks are amazing. They already look like paintings. And now I have a place to stay when I go—Chakotay has a spare room and he said I’d be welcome there any time. Hey, where were Seven and Revi going?”

Gretchen was long used to Phoebe’s abrupt changes of direction, but she could see Lynne shaking her head. “I don’t know, why?”

“They were just coming out of the barn in the four-seater when I came up the walk.”

“Probably off to town for some reason. I don’t track their every move, Phoebe.”

“Well, I know, but I waved and Revi just sort of nodded, and she looked kind of like I used to when you were taking me to placement exams.”

“Maybe they were going to their counseling appointment,” Gretchen guessed.

“No, that’s not until tomorrow,” said Lynne. “I hope they’re not house hunting.”

“They’re not leaving, are they?” Gretchen was dismayed. “Oh, they can’t. It’s too soon.”

“Tell me about it. Actually, Gretchen, would you tell them that? They were making noises about not wanting to wear out their welcome here.”

“As if they could! Are they honestly that blind? Good heavens. I’ll tell them the next time I see them.”

~

It was a very quiet ride from the transport station back to the farm-
house, and Seven didn’t even attempt small talk. She’d never been successful at it in the first place, and she was doubly certain that it would fail now. Revi was normally the one who smoothed over their social situations, but she sat stone-faced in the passenger seat, her still posture belying the turmoil in her mind.

“This is lovely countryside,” ventured Dhara from the back seat. “I’ve never been to Indiana before.”

“It’s a bit different from San Francisco,” said Revi. “I like it. There’s a peace here that I never felt in San Francisco.”

After a pause, Dhara said, “I don’t think that has anything to do with the landscape.”

Revi let out a soft snort. “No, I don’t suppose it does.”

: Revi, she’s at least making an attempt. I think you should respect that. :

: I do. I just don’t know what to say. ‘Gee, Mother, thanks so much for coming so that we can share an interlink and I can find out why Father never loved me and you left me to fight all my own battles?’ If you think it’s awkward now, wait until I say that. :

: In a few minutes she’ll know exactly what you’re thinking and feeling anyway. What is the difference? :

Revi sighed. : Sometimes I hate your logic. : She opened her mouth to speak, but Dhara beat her to it.

“Revi, if I can ask—is there a reason why you and I can’t settle this alone? It’s not that I don’t think you’re a perfectly wonderful young woman, Seven, but…this is rather intimate.”

“It’s extremely intimate,” said Seven. “And I’m not offended by your question.” She waited for Revi to explain.

“The problem is that first of all, I’m way too close to this to be able to control our interlink,” said Revi. “And someone has to control it, because you have no experience. You’re not going to be able to communicate coherently at first, not without some help. Seven will be there to help you, because I’m not sure I’ll be able to.” She paused. “And second, taking Seven out of our link means tuning out her frequency and losing all contact with her. Except for one time when we had to sever our connection for strategic reasons, and once when I did it because I was a damned idiot, we’ve never been out of contact. I hope we never are again.”

Smiling, Seven reached over for her hand. “You were a damned idiot,” she said. “But you’ve compensated for it.”
“You’re in each other’s minds all the time? Every minute?”

“Every second,” said Revi. “But that doesn’t mean we’re always listening.”

“I don’t understand.”

Seven listened as Revi turned several images over in her mind, trying to find one that could help her mother envision something that was utterly foreign to her. “All right,” she said at last, “think of it this way. When you and Father are both in the house, are you always talking to each other? Every minute?”

“No, of course not. Half the time we’re not even in the same room.”

: Only half? :

Seven patted her partner’s thigh. : You need to rein in that sarcasm when you link with her. :

: I know. It’s just so automatic. : Aloud, Revi said, “So you’re in the house with him, but you’re not talking. Are you aware that he’s there? Do you hear him moving around the house, or making any sounds, or see him pass by wherever you are?”

“Yes, most of the time. If he’s reading, though, I may not know he’s there unless I walk by and see him.”

“Well, on a physical level, what you experience in being aware of him is very similar to what Seven and I experience on a mental level. We always know the other one is there, but we’re not always talking to each other. Or listening. We inhabit the same mental space, just like you and Father inhabit the same house. But we’re not always in the same room. The main difference is that when you want to talk to Father and he’s in a different room, you have to go and find him. When I want to talk to Seven, it doesn’t matter where she is.”

“I think I see,” said Dhara. “So you’re connected, but you’re not always using the connection.”

“Right,” said Revi in relief.

“But what if you’re talking or thinking about something you’d rather keep to yourself?”

“We don’t have any secrets from each other.”

“Gods above, I can’t imagine living that way.”

: If I were married to him, I wouldn’t be able to imagine it either. :

: Revi! :
: Sorry. : Revi shook her head. : I don’t know if I can keep those thoughts down. :

“But what about surprises?” Dhara was saying. “What do you do about gifts for each other, or special plans?”

“Well, there is one time when we don’t hear each other,” said Revi. “When we’re regenerating.”

“When you’re what?”

She looked over at Seven. “Ah...I think it’ll be easier to explain when we show you the alcoves. Which will be in about two minutes; there’s the Janeway farm.”

~

For the second time in half an hour, a call came from the front of the house. “Gretchen, are you home?”

Gretchen recognized Revi’s voice. It didn’t matter how many times she’d told those two to just come on in, they still insisted on waiting at the door. Revi had said that she couldn’t overcome a lifetime of training just like that, and of course Seven followed Revi’s lead.

“We’re in the kitchen,” she called out. In a lower voice, she asked Lynne, “Will they ever learn Indiana manners?”

Lynne gave her a half smile. “I don’t think so. And I have to tell you that if I weren’t your daughter-in-law, I wouldn’t have learned them either. We didn’t just walk into people’s houses in Colorado.”

“I am not people,” said Gretchen, just as Revi came in sight. Right behind her was a woman she’d never seen before, and Gretchen immediately stood up as the stranger, followed closely by Seven, walked into the kitchen.

“Everyone, this is my mother, Dhara.” Revi looked at Gretchen as she said it, an unspoken apology in her eyes. “Mother, this is Gretchen Janeway, her daughter Phoebe, and my good friend Lynne Hamilton.”

“I’m delighted to meet you.” Gretchen stepped forward with her hand out. “Welcome to my home.”

Dhara was a small woman, shorter and slighter of build than her daughter. But there was no mistaking the family resemblance as she offered a hesitant smile and said, “Thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m so grateful to you for giving Revi a place to stay.”
“This isn’t a place to stay. That guest house is her home for as long as she and Seven want, and I hope it’s for a long time.” Gretchen looked sternly at both young women as she spoke, and saw that her message had been received. By now Phoebe and Lynne were standing as well, offering words of welcome as they shook hands.

Dhara seemed a little overwhelmed as she greeted Lynne. “I saw you on FedComm,” she said shyly. “What a remarkable story. The odds of Voyager finding you—it’s just amazing.”

“Ordinarily I’d agree with you,” said Lynne, “but when it comes to Kathryn, nothing seems too surprising. She has a habit of beating the odds.” She looked over at Revi. “So does your daughter.”

“I know,” said Dhara, following her glance. “Believe me, I know.”

“Mother has come to link up with me,” said Revi. Gretchen raised her eyebrows. She hadn’t heard a word about this, but from Revi’s behavior it seemed to have substantial meaning.

“Ohh,” said Lynne, who apparently knew what was going on. “Dhara, that’s wonderful. And it couldn’t have been an easy decision. It scared the hell out of me the first time I linked in with Revi and Seven.”

Dhara stared. “You’re one of them, too?” A flush instantly rose in her face. “I’m so sorry, that was inexcusably rude.”

Lynne waved it off. “Don’t worry about it. I left that little detail out of my interviews. Yes, I am, but I was luckier than either Revi or Seven. I don’t carry any visible implants as long as my arms and legs are covered. Anyway, I think you’re really courageous. And I can tell you that they’ll take good care of you. If Seven and Revi hadn’t linked in with me when I needed it, I wouldn’t be standing here talking to you.”

Dhara looked at Revi, who shrugged and said, “It was a medical procedure. Nothing like what we’ll be doing.”

“It was a medical procedure that could have killed both of them,” corrected Lynne. “They risked their lives to save me. That’s who you’re going to be linking in with. You couldn’t possibly be any safer.”

“I never thought it wouldn’t be safe,” said Dhara. “Not with Revi. But…I appreciate what you’re trying to do.” She looked around. “Will we be doing it here?”

“No,” said Revi. “I just wanted you to meet them. We’ll be doing this in the guest house, where Seven and I are staying. But first we’re taking a little detour to the barn.”
“The barn?” Dhara asked in confusion.

Lynne grinned. “Let me know if you find any more kittens.”

When the three women left a few minutes later, Gretchen and Phoebe both looked at Lynne expectantly. “What the hell was that all about?” demanded Phoebe. “That woman looked like she was going into brain surgery.”

“That’s probably exactly how she feels,” said Lynne.

Surprised at the characterization, Seven tried to see them through Dhara’s eyes. Borg design valued efficiency first and foremost, and the alcoves were a perfect example of highly advanced technology built in the most efficient, useful and durable manner. Certainly they weren’t as aesthetic as Starfleet designs, but that didn’t make them sinister.

“They’re regeneration alcoves,” said Revi. “Borg are partly organic and partly cybernetic, and those cybernetic systems need to be recharged on a regular basis. Humans recharge by eating food and drinking fluids; Borg recharge through absorbing pure energy into their systems. It’s called regeneration, and it’s very similar to sleeping.”

“In a way, this is our bedroom,” said Seven.

“You sleep in these? How?”

“We have abdominal implants, which have an external connection that matches a contact on the alcove. Here, I’ll show you.” Revi stepped up to the nearest alcove, gesturing for her mother to follow. Dhara trailed after with an expression of mingled horror and fascination, and bent down to look at the power contact that Revi was pointing out.

“So you touch this and it sends energy into you?” At Revi’s nod, she looked at the contact again. “You have to stand here?”
“Yes. We stand facing outward, because the connection is in the back of our implants.”

“How on earth do you sleep standing up?”

“Well, I said it was similar to sleeping. It’s not actually sleeping. It’s more like a state of suspended animation. The moment we make contact, we shut down.” Revi snapped her fingers. “Just like that. And when the regeneration cycle is complete, we wake back up just the same way.” She snapped her fingers again. “Except that we’re fully recharged, fully awake, and ready to go. No coffee necessary.”

The attempt at humor fell flat; Dhara was too overwhelmed. She kept looking back and forth between Revi and the alcove. “How often do you…regenerate?”

“Usually for eight hours every three nights, but more often if we need to. We can go longer without it, but we start to lose our ability to function. Just like you do if you haven’t had enough sleep. But we sleep, too, the regular way.”

A look of relief washed over Dhara’s face, and Revi caught it. “No, Mother. We’re not machines. We just have a lot of cybernetic parts inside of us.”

“I didn’t say you were.” But she couldn’t tear her eyes off the alcove and the contact Revi had pointed out. Tentatively, she touched it. “You said an abdominal implant. You mean something like what you have over your eye?”

“No. It’s quite a bit larger than that. The abdominal implant performs a huge number of regulatory functions.”

Dhara’s eyes went to Revi’s waistline, hidden beneath the bulky sweater. “Could you…is it something I could see?”

Revi hesitated, and Dhara shook her head. “No, no, I’m sorry. Never mind, I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Mother,” said Revi gently, “I don’t have any problem with you seeing it. I’m just worried that you might.”

“You are my daughter,” said Dhara with a burst of vehemence. “I will not have a problem seeing anything that’s a part of you.”

: I doubt that. :

Seven did, too, but she also recognized Dhara’s motivation. If there was anything she understood, it was the driving force of a need to know.

: She likely will have a problem. But I believe she needs to see it anyway. :
I hope you’re right. "Okay," said Revi. "It’s not pretty." She hiked up her sweater, untucked her undershirt, and lifted both to just beneath her breasts, exposing the black implant that wrapped all the way around her waist. Dhara’s hand went to her mouth as she stared.

"Oh, Revi…"

"It doesn’t hurt."

"But…gods, it’s so big! They took so much of you. So much…” She shook her head as the tears came to her eyes. "I’m so sorry."

Revi lowered her sweater. "I know. It’s okay."

"Is it?"

"Physically I’m fine, Mother. Really. They took a lot of my body, but I’m not debilitated. Just the opposite, in fact. Remember that I said this implant regulates a lot of functions?"

Dhara nodded.

"Well, along with the other implants and the nanoprobes, it makes sure I don’t ever get sick. If I’m injured, I heal almost instantly. I can do things with my implants that Human muscles simply aren’t capable of. It’s not what any of us would have chosen, but it’s not all bad."

Looking at Seven, Dhara asked, "Do you have this…this abdominal implant, too?"

"Yes. All Borg do."

"So Lynne has it as well."

"No," said Revi. "Lynne was a special case. When we freed her from the Collective, her implants were self-destructing. They would have killed her if we hadn’t pulled them out. She has fewer implants than either Seven or me."

"Wait—so you could take this out if you wanted to?"

Revi sighed. : She wants so much for this to be fixable. : "No, I couldn’t," she said. "Lynne barely survived the surgery, and she’d only had the implant for three days. I’ve had this for almost eleven years. My biological systems are completely, irrevocably tied into it. I need it to live. So does Seven."

Dhara said nothing for a moment. Then, in a very quiet voice, she asked, "Can I see it again?"

"Of course. Do you want to feel it?" Revi lifted her sweater again. "It’s all right if you do."

Seven watched Dhara swallow with some difficulty as she reached out
and barely brushed her fingertips across the smooth surface of the lower implant. Her eyebrows lifted in surprise, and she touched it with slightly more confidence.

“It’s warm!”

“It’s part of my body. Wouldn’t do my organic systems any good to have a cold sink sitting in the middle of them.”

Revi’s matter-of-fact attitude was having an effect; Seven could see Dhara beginning to relax her posture. : I think it’s working. :

: I think so too. : They had discussed this prior to picking up Dhara at the transport station, and concluded that it would be better to get her accustomed to the reality of Revi’s Borgness before initiating the link. As Revi had said, better to shock her in the familiar confines of her own mind than to shock her in the foreign space of an interlink. But they had planned simply to show her the alcoves and talk about how they’d incorporated their Borg needs into their daily lives. Neither of them had anticipated that Dhara would want such a personal exposure.

Dhara was venturing further now, running her fingers over the implant’s ridges. When Revi squirmed, she pulled her hand back as if she’d burned it. “Did I hurt you? I’m sorry!”

“No, you didn’t hurt me.” Revi was smiling. “It just tickles.”

“It tickles?”

“It’s not a hunk of metal alloy, Mother. It’s a sensitive, incredibly advanced cybernetic implant.”

“And it tickles.” With an incredulous smile, Dhara feathered her fingers down the ridges again, and this time Revi laughed out loud as she stepped away and pulled her sweater down.

“Oh, that’s enough for you,” she said. “Didn’t take you long to take advantage!”

Dhara’s smile was a blinding contrast to the expressions that Seven had previously seen on her face. “I can’t believe it. That’s astonishing. What other implants do you have?”

“Well, there’s one in my head. It’s called a cortical implant, and it’s pretty much like having the entire Federation database sitting in my brain. Except this database contains information from about eight thousand species.”

“Gods above. I can’t even comprehend it.”

“It is pretty amazing,” Revi conceded. “That’s one of my Borg leftovers
that I’d hate to lose. I also have a lot of internal implants that either regulate or replace most of my internal organs, and provide structural support to my skeleton and muscles. There are a few other external implants you haven’t seen yet. And, ah…there’s my arm.”

“Your arm.” Dhara looked from one to the other, but saw nothing out of the ordinary because Revi was wearing her simulated skin glove. “One of them has an implant? Like Seven’s hand?”

“No. This might be the hardest thing for you to see, Mother. One of my arms is an implant. It’s entirely cybernetic.”

“It doesn’t look like it.”

Revi lifted her arm and slowly pulled off the glove, exposing the clamp at the end. Then she pushed up her sleeve. Dhara’s mouth dropped open as she stared at the full length of metal alloy, cybernetic mesh, and embedded tools.

“I was a medical and repair drone in the Collective,” said Revi. “So I was outfitted with an arm that enabled me to make repairs to cybernetic systems, and perform surgeries on organic systems. This arm is half the tools in a sickbay and an engineering bay all rolled up into one.”

“Oh, Revi…”

“It’s all right. This actually is something I could replace if I wanted to. I did it for Lynne. But I haven’t decided if I want to lose this yet. It gives me capabilities as a doctor that I would never have with a normal Human prosthetic.”

“Lynne had an arm like that?”

“Not precisely like this, but yes.”

They could see Dhara struggling to hide her reaction. Nothing else she’d seen so far had shaken her as much as Revi’s arm.

Seven stepped up and took Revi’s clamp in her own hand. : Hold on, : she warned. Running her fingers along the arm, she found the spot on the inside of the elbow where the rigid exoskeleton gave way to a thin mesh, enabling the joint to bend. As her fingers danced across the mesh, Revi smiled.

: Good thinking, darling. : But even though Revi knew what she was doing, she still couldn’t stop the involuntary reaction as she tried to pull away. Seven kept a tight grip and continued to tickle her, until Revi was squirming. “Okay, okay, stop!” she cried, laughing.

Dhara was watching in amazement. “That’s ticklish too?”
“Only here.” Still holding Revi’s clamp, Seven turned her arm out so that Dhara could see the mesh. “The rest of the arm is an exoskeleton. But it thins here where the joint bends. It took me considerable time to discover Revi’s sensitivity here.”

“Well, I certainly wasn’t going to tell you about it. I knew you’d use it against me.”

Dhara’s expression had relaxed again. “May I?”

“Certainly.” Seven released her grip, stepping back to give Dhara room. Hesitantly, Dhara took the outstretched clamp in her own hand and exhaled.

“It’s warm too,” she said, in the tone of one whose worst fears have gone unrealized.

“And it’s capable of extremely fine motion,” said Revi. “Will you hold out your hand?” When Dhara complied, Revi opened her clamp and brushed one of the tips across the upturned palm, barely making contact with the skin.

“Oh,” murmured Dhara.

Gently, Revi grasped her mother’s hand in her clamp and lifted it up to her own cheek, letting her feel the warm, very Human skin. “I’m still me,” she said.

A smile trembled on Dhara’s lips even as her eyes shone with unshed tears. “Thank you,” she whispered, cupping her daughter’s cheek. “I don’t know how you knew what I needed.”

“I just thought about what I’d need in your place.”

Dhara left her hand where it was. “You put up that invincible front, but you’re still my Revi inside.”

Seven winced. It was the wrong thing to say, and Revi’s face closed down as she took a half-step back. “I wish that were true.”

“Of course it’s true! Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because I’m—” Revi stopped and shook her head. “This is exactly the conversation we need to be having in the interlink. I don’t want to get into it here. So I guess it’s time. Shall we go to the house?”

Dhara was clearly puzzled and unhappy about the withdrawal, but she merely nodded. “That’s what I came for. I’m ready.”

: I’m not. : Revi turned and led them out. It was a quiet walk over to the guest house, and this time Dhara made no effort to break the silence. Not a word was said until they were in the living room, where Revi motioned
her mother to the sofa and then opened the medkit on the table. Pulling out a tricorder, she began scanning her.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m checking you for any physical issues that might become a problem during our link,” said Revi. “We’re not doing this if there’s any possible danger for you.”

“I’m perfectly healthy.”

“I can see that.” Snapping the tricorder shut, Revi tossed it back into the medkit and hesitated before taking out the external transceiver. “Are you still certain you want to continue?”

“Are you?”

“Not really, but I think we have to.”

“Interesting,” said Dhara. “I thought I was the reluctant one. Is there something about this interlink that you’re not telling me?”

“About a million things, yes, but you won’t understand any of them until you’re in it.” Revi paused, gathering herself, and then forged ahead. “All right. When you first come online, it’s going to be difficult for you to communicate with us. We’ve had a long time to learn thought clarification, and how to read thoughts that aren’t so clear. What you’ll need to do is think in full sentences, like you’re talking in your head. If you don’t, we’ll just hear a jumble. Seven and I have had time to get used to each other’s thought processes, so we don’t always need that kind of clarity to understand each other, but it will be different with you.”

“All right. I’ll do my best.”

“If you want to share memories as well as thoughts, try to remember them like a story, so that they’re coherent. Otherwise we’ll see the disjointed images and it will be harder for us to put them together.”

“Okay.”

“And remember that this is only temporary, and as soon as we terminate the link, it’s over.”

A small smile appeared. “I said I’m ready.”

“Right.” Having no other reasons to delay, Revi sat on the couch beside her, while Seven chose the chair opposite in order to see them both clearly. Holding up the transceiver, Revi said, “If you get overwhelmed, we’ll know and we’ll stop the process. You don’t have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable.”
“Everything about this makes me uncomfortable, and I think you’re feeling just the same way,” said Dhara. “That’s not the point.”

Seven was startled to hear the words come out of her mouth. That had sounded exactly like Revi.

: Well, she is my mother. :

: Yes, but the question is whether you absorbed that from her, or whether she absorbed it from you. :

“All right,” said Revi. “I’m attaching the transceiver. It’s going here on the back of your neck. Can you lift your hair?” A moment later a soft snick indicated the molecular adhesion, and Dhara’s eyes widened. “And I’m activating it…now.”

Once before, they had brought an untrained mind into their link. Lynne’s first time had been difficult for all three of them, though it had been because of their shared memories and not Lynne’s ability to focus. It had only taken her a few minutes to adapt to the different form of communication.

Dhara floundered. The moment she came online, she brought a tumult of emotions with her and no clear thoughts at all. Though both Seven and Revi had been prepared for the emotional onslaught, and had raised their own blocks in preparation, they still felt buffeted. Dhara was afraid of the link, even as it excited her—and then she felt shame about her excitement. Revi wasn’t surprised by this, since her father would have forbidden this activity had he known, and her mother wasn’t in the habit of going against him. What did surprise her was the fascinated wonder that flowed from Dhara; an awe at the mere fact of their mental connection. There was no resistance at all, even with the fear of what might be shared—willingly or unwillingly—in the coming moments. Dhara had prepared for this; she had memories she wanted to share. And from the jumble of partial thoughts that were pouring from her mind, Revi and Seven could pick out her belief that none of her memories absolutely had to remain hidden, though she was certainly hoping that such a complete exchange would not occur. Still, she had come into this prepared for the worst, despite Revi’s assurance that they would not attempt to see anything beyond what she wished to show them. Revi had expected the lack of trust, but she was taken aback that her mother would have overcome it by simply deciding she had nothing to hide.

What frightened Dhara the most, beyond the mere fact of doing some-
thing so utterly foreign, was seeing memories from Revi that would hurt her. Yet in that fear she was thinking not of Revi’s childhood, but of what had happened after she had stopped coming home: her marriage, a life she’d lived without ever telling her parents…and, of course, her assimilation and years as a Borg.

All of this and more swirled through their link as Seven and Revi worked together to tamp down Dhara’s nervousness and her overabundance of emotions, as well as reminding her to focus on a single thought and say it in her mind. Their efforts gradually began to take effect, until the first complete thought finally came through.

: You’re both so clear in my mind. Why aren’t you hearing me? What am I doing wrong? :

: We are now, Mother. We just couldn’t separate out any single thought until now. :

: Oh! You heard me! :

: You’re doing fine, : Seven assured her. : You’re adapting. :

: I can feel you. It’s like you’ve been holding my hand. Incredible. This is simply amazing! : Her communication degenerated into another burst of partial thoughts as her excitement at being heard overwhelmed her ability to focus.

: Mother, think in sentences! :

After a few moments, Dhara calmed herself enough to regain her clarity. : I’m sorry. It’s just so exciting. I never had any idea. Gods, to think you live this way all the time! :

: Not all the time. We’re usually a bit calmer than this. :

: Of course you are. I’m trying, really. I never realized how hard it is to think in sentences. :

: It may be simpler if you focus more on the thoughts and less on the emotions, : offered Seven. : Accept that you feel them, and then set them aside. :

This seemed to help, or perhaps Dhara was adapting to the new experience, but her emotions did become a little less tumultuous. Then they saw an image in her mind: the two of them standing on Dhara’s doorstep seven days ago. It was accompanied by a burst of remembered joy, followed swiftly by dismay and sorrow as a second image followed, of Revi stalking back out of the living room with Seven in tow.

: Did you see it? :
It was Seven who responded, as Revi was still startled by what her mother had just shared.

: Yes, we did. And felt what you felt. :

: It worked! : The thought was crystal clear; Dhara’s sense of success had momentarily helped her to focus. : That was much easier than communicating in verbal thoughts. :

: Images are interpreted by a different part of your brain than verbal thoughts. :

Revi took refuge in anatomy.

: I guess that makes sense. Perhaps I’m better at pictures than words. : The thought pattern veered. : You’re…surprised? That I would be happy to see you? Is that—am I getting that right? :

With an audible sigh, Revi confirmed her mother’s guess. : Yes, you’re getting it right. I just didn’t expect that. :

“But why?” asked Dhara. A flash of embarrassment shot through their link as she realized she’d spoken aloud, but it was quickly followed by a sense of relief. “I think I should just talk. It’s so much harder to communicate the way you do, and the gods know we don’t need any more barriers between us. It’s enough that I can feel what you feel.”

Seven shot a glance at Revi. Dhara was giving up on her first try? Did she not see that the enhanced thought communication was just as superior as the enhanced image and emotional communication? Not being accustomed to such rapid defeatism, she could not control her instant contempt. No one on Voyager would simply give up on something because it was not easy enough.

“Revi!” Though Dhara kept the hurt off her face, it was clear in her emotions. “How can you judge me? Of all people, you should know how difficult it was for me to even come here!”

Caught between responding to her mother’s misperception and not wanting to expose Seven, Revi could only look at Dhara in dismay.

“That wasn’t Revi,” said Seven, who had no competing motivations. “You were sensing me.”

Dhara’s hurt instantly shifted to irritation. “I see.”

“Okay, this is already not going well,” Revi muttered.

“You’re a rather intolerant young woman, aren’t you?” asked Dhara with some asperity. “Is that from being raised as a Borg?”

“How ironic that you would use the term ‘intolerant’ after—”

“Hold it!” Revi held up her arms, one palm toward her mother and the
clamp toward Seven. “This is not working. Seven, Mother is not Starfleet and this is completely out of her range of experience. You can’t hold her to the standards you’re used to. Mother, you’re in an interlink and that means you feel everything, good and bad. And the first thing you learn in an interlink is that people have all kinds of emotions flitting through their minds, and you can’t judge them by what they think or feel because those things can’t really be controlled. You have to judge by what they say and do.”

“Then what is the point—” Dhara stopped, took a breath, and continued more calmly, “Then I think perhaps we should limit this to you and me, since I am not going to be able to distinguish who is feeling what. Not to be discourteous to Seven, but what matters to me is what you think and feel.”

“I’m not cutting Seven out of the link,” said Revi instantly. “It’s out of the question.”

By now Seven was feeling guilty at having instigated a disagreement almost before they’d even begun. “I don’t want to impede this process,” she said.

: Don’t you even think about it! : Revi was alarmed at the very prospect. : I can’t do this without you. :

“Perhaps,” Seven continued with a reassuring glance at her partner, “I can simply block my emotions from the link.”

: Oh. : Revi smiled sheepishly. “That might be a good idea.”

“You can do that?”

Seven looked over to Dhara. “Yes. Revi taught me the skill shortly after we met.”

“But we haven’t had to use it in a while,” said Revi. “I’ve nearly forgotten how.”

Seven accepted the obvious lie as an attempt at humor, knowing Revi’s need to defuse tense situations. “Fortunately, you’re not the one who needs to remember.”

Dhara looked back and forth between them, her eyebrows slightly scrunched. “I can’t even keep up with what you two are thinking. But I can feel a sort of…smoothness between you. It’s interesting.” She turned to face Seven fully. “I apologize for speaking so sharply. It was…unkind.”

Seven hesitated. She wasn’t at all sorry for her reaction; she really did think less of Dhara for giving up on mental communication so soon. It
was not something she would have expected of the woman who had raised Revi. But... “I apologize as well,” she said. “I didn’t mean for my judgment to cause any difficulties for you or Revi. I’m shielding my emotions from the link now.” It took considerably more effort than she remembered, and she thought ruefully that she was out of practice.

: We both are, darling. That’s the way I like it. : Revi shot her a quick smile before turning back to her mother. “Okay, that should make things a little simpler. And for the record, Mother, I definitely know how hard it must have been for you to come here. Thank you for coming.”

“You’re welcome.”

There was an uncomfortable pause, as each of them waited for the other to take the next step. At last Dhara said, “You never answered my question.”

“What question?”

“Why would you be surprised that I’d be happy to see you on my doorstep?”

“Ah...” Revi nervously rubbed an invisible spot on her arm. “You know, I was kind of hoping we could ease into this a bit more before getting into the hard part.”

Frowning, Dhara said, “I guess I don’t understand why this part should be so hard. After thinking you were dead and having you miraculously come back home, why wouldn’t I be happy? You looked like all my dreams come true.”

Revi began to speak, then closed her mouth and shook her head. : I can’t say that. :

“Can’t say what? Yes, I heard you. I may not be any good at ‘talking’ in my head, but I can hear you perfectly well. And wasn’t the whole point of this to not keep anything back? To clear the air?”

Revi looked over in frustration, but there was nothing Seven could do to help. Revi could not pull back from uncomfortable questions unless she put an end to the entire process. And that, Seven knew, would feel like a failure to her. She’d started something that she now had to finish.

With a quick glance of wry acknowledgment, Revi turned back to her mother. “Yes, it was. You’re right. It’s just hard for me to say things that I know are going to hurt you.”

Even the mention of the word caused a shiver of anticipatory pain through Dhara’s emotions. “Go ahead. Just do it. If we don’t get through
this, you’ll leave and that will hurt me far more.” She steeled herself and waited.

Her attitude made it even more difficult for Revi, who spent several seconds working up to the effort. “I almost didn’t come home,” she said at last. “I didn’t want to put myself in that position again.”

“What position?” asked Dhara, gamely ignoring the sharp hurt that Revi’s very first sentence had already caused.

Revi paused, already regretting her words, and Dhara shook her head. “Don’t you stop. It’s taken too long to get to this point.”

Seven was unaccustomed to seeing her partner so uncertain. Unable to withstand the physical distance, she got up from her chair and came over to sit on the coffee table, reaching out for Revi’s hand. With a grateful thought sent in her direction, Revi said, “Of being back in the battle. Of fighting with Father, and feeling alone because you wouldn’t defend me. I’m surprised that you were so happy to see me because frankly, I never realized you cared that much.”

Dhara sucked in a breath, but held herself back as Revi added, “I stopped visiting you after I married Steph because I just couldn’t do it anymore. And it’s even worse now. I don’t have any tolerance left for it.”

She stopped, looking at her mother somewhat anxiously. But Dhara’s only response was, “I see.”

: No, you don’t. :

Dhara heard it. “No,” she said. “You’re right. I don’t see how you could possibly not know that I love you, and I don’t see how you could view us in such an adversarial way. We are your parents. Do you know how hard it was on your father when Starfleet told us you were killed in action? He broke down and cried, Revi. He wept for you. Yes, he argues with you, but that doesn’t change how he feels about you.”

“And how does he feel, exactly?”

“He loves you!” Dhara spoke as if Revi’s question had been rhetorical, and her firm belief surged through their link.

Revi shook her head. “Sorry, Mother. I’m not buying it, no matter how much you’re ready to sell.” Her own belief was just as firm, and utterly untouched by her mother’s emotion.

“Agh!” Dhara threw her hands up. “Then tell me exactly how I’m supposed to convince you?”

“I don’t think you can.” Revi looked at her thoughtfully. “I didn’t know
what to expect when you agreed to my offer, but now I see that it doesn’t
matter what you say or even think about him. Your view isn’t accurate.
You really do believe what you’re saying, but it’s just not true. I think
you’ve made yourself believe it. You had to.”

Dhara was speechless. “I had to?” she managed at last. “Do you have
any idea how arrogant that sounds?”

“Yes. But I’m not saying this as your daughter. I’m saying it as a
doctor.” Revi was warming up now, finding confidence by separating
herself from the topic. “For reasons I’ll never understand, you chose to
stay with him. But you were raised with the old beliefs, where the
husband is supposed to be the infallible, wise, loving head of the family.
Your husband was none of those things. So to justify your staying, to
make it more emotionally feasible, you had to convince yourself that he
was. Gods, why didn’t I ever think of this before? It makes so much
more sense.”

“Oh, no no no.” Dhara shook her head vehemently. “That is not the
case. I know damn well your father isn’t infallible. He is capable of
wisdom, though not very often, and he most certainly is not good at
showing his love. I may make excuses for him, but I am not blind. How
could I be, when I spent so many years trying to fix the problems between
you and him? The number of times I had to hold you and talk you
through it after you and he disagreed—”

“Disagreed?” Revi’s incredulity made Seven wince, and even Dhara
stopped cold, her eyes wide. “Disagreed? Is that what you called it all these
years? ‘Oh, there’s Nishad shouting at Revi in her room again; they must
be having another of their disagreements.’ Well, now I know why you
never protected me. How much protection could I possibly need when all
we were having was a disagreement?” Her voice dripped sarcasm, but the
pain behind it pierced the link and left Dhara blinking in confusion.

“Where does this come from?” she said. “I honestly don’t understand! I
thought this interlink of yours would make everything clear, but I’m just
as much in the dark as ever. Blessed gods, so much hurt, and from what?
From your father shouting at you? Do you think you were the only child
in the world whose father spoke in loud tones?”

Revi stared at her in astonishment. “You really don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t!”
“How—” Revi turned to Seven, her eyes beseeching. : I don’t know what to do. Seven, it’s not possible that she wouldn’t know. It’s just not. :

Rarely in her life had Seven felt so helpless. Revi was her guide in the intricacies of Human emotions, but she’d lost her own way and was looking to Seven for help. It was a reversal of roles that was as frightening as it was unexpected.

She clasped Revi’s hand in hers again, noting that it was two point three degrees cooler than normal, and said what needed to be said. “Dhara, Revi’s pain comes from having a father who verbally and physically abused her, and a mother who never stopped it.”

Dhara’s jaw dropped. For just a moment they felt her fear, but it was almost instantly overpowered by a blast of denial. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “That’s not true.”

Revi jerked her hand from Seven’s grasp as she sat up straight. “What do you mean, it’s not true?”

“He didn’t, Revi. Unless you consider a father raising his voice to his child to be verbal abuse. If that’s the case, then verbal abuse is positively rampant; practically every child in the universe could claim it. And he certainly did not abuse you physically. He disciplined you, yes, but that is not the same thing. I think perhaps you might be misinterpreting some childhood memories.”

“Unbelievable,” breathed Revi. “Absolutely unbelievable. Misinterpreting childhood memories? How about I share some of those with you so you can see for yourself?”

Without waiting for an answer, she sent a series of images down the link. In every one of them, her mother stood silent while her father was red-faced and angry, sometimes shouting, sometimes lecturing in a tone dripping with condescension or outright dislike. And then the memories began to include him slapping her face, grabbing her wrist hard enough to bruise, shoving her in the back so that she stumbled as she hurried in front of him to her room, and finally an image of him slipping his belt out of its loops and winding the buckle end around his hand—

“Enough!” said Dhara. “I know. I remember. It’s true that you and your father had a difficult relationship, I’m not denying that. But you needed the discipline. Verbal reprimands stopped working when you hit your teen years. You were too willful; we worried about losing control of
“Mother, I’m a doctor! Do you think I don’t know enough about memory engrams and regression to recognize what’s real and what’s not?”

“I don’t doubt your professional abilities. But you’re not being a professional right now. This is too personal.”

“You’re damn right it is!”

Ignoring the anger that would have been obvious even without an interlink, Dhara said in a voice of forced calm, “Let me show you what I remember from those times. And I’ll apologize in advance if I can’t send the images as clearly as you can.”

Seven closed her eyes, fascinated by the memories Dhara was now sharing. She needn’t have apologized; they were crystal clear—and markedly different from Revi’s. Nishad shouted and lectured, but never with the condescension or dislike that Revi remembered. There was frustration and anger, certainly, but also bewilderment and sometimes despair that nothing he did was getting through to his daughter. There were even memories of him talking to Dhara as they lay in bed together afterward, wishing that Revi would just comply and stop making it so hard for him.

“I know he slapped you, and I’m not saying it was right. It’s just that sometimes his frustration got the better of him. But he only used the belt a few times, and he felt so terrible afterwards. I think it hurt him almost as much as y—”

“Fucking hell!” Revi’s shocked fury was explosive. “How could you never have heard? He used the belt more than just a few times, and he didn’t always wrap the buckle end around his hand!”

The images came in a tumbling, disordered rush; Revi had lost her mental discipline. Over and over, they saw different scenes of Nishad advancing into Revi’s bedroom, his face set in a grim mask as he slipped out his belt and wrapped it so that the buckle end swung on a short length of free belt. They saw the anger in his eyes as he wielded it, and they felt Revi’s remembered terror and pain. In some memories she tried to get away, in others she simply gave up and curled into a ball, protecting her head and face. They saw Nishad looking down at her, saying *Maybe this time it’ll sink in!,* and Revi staring at her tear-stained face in the bath-
room mirror as she reached for the dermal regenerator and began sealing
the red slashes on her body.

Dhara recoiled in horror. “No! He didn’t, he didn’t do that, I never saw
a mark on you. I would have known.”

“Because I never left the room until I’d healed them all, and I always
wore long pants and sleeves until they faded! I can’t make up memories,
Mother. You know it’s the truth.”

Dhara denied it, she wouldn’t believe it, she couldn’t accept it, but
Revi bombarded her with the images in a cathartic blast of pain and rage
and humiliation, the memories and emotions pouring out in an unending
stream that continued even after Seven dropped her emotional block and
stepped in. This was precisely the loss of control Revi had been afraid of,
and Seven was nearly overwhelmed by it. She surrounded her partner
with love, protection, calm and peace, hearing Dhara’s distress outside the
wall she’d built for Revi but finding herself unable to take care of both of
them at once. A choice between Dhara and Revi was no choice at all, and
Seven put everything she had into bringing Revi back to a safe place.

At last Revi stopped, finally hearing her, allowing herself to be soothed
by a continuous message of love and safety. But Dhara had no such
message to help her, and she wept as she admitted her own failure. She
was swamped by horror, guilt and shame, apologizing over and over
because she should have known, but hadn’t seen it.

By the time Revi was calm enough to register her mother’s pain, her
natural empathy reasserted itself in response. But she still needed the
explanation she’d lacked all her adult life.

“You abandoned me,” she said, her voice rough from the emotion.
Dhara shook her head emphatically, the tears rolling down her face, but
Revi put a hand on her leg and willed her to meet her eyes. “Every single
time it happened I prayed for that door to open behind him. I prayed for
you to walk in and make him stop. You never did. So I gave up on you. I
gave up on both of you. The one thing that always hurt more than
anything else was that I never understood why he didn’t love me at all,
and why you didn’t love me enough to protect me.”

“I do, gods, you’re my only child…”

“I know, Mother. That part I know now, and it helps, it really does. But
it makes me more confused than ever. How could you love me like that
and leave me to him? I don’t understand. Why didn’t you ever come?”
“Because I didn’t know…”

“You should have! You know it, I can feel it. Explain this to me, please! Mother!” Revi’s voice broke on a sob. “How could you love me and abandon me?”

Dhora was nearly incapable of answering, the emotions swamping her ability to think coherently. Her reality had been shattered and what she’d known as truth was now thrown into doubt. But there was one truth that she clung to, one that stood firm among the wreckage of the rest. She wiped her eyes and said, “If I had ever thought you were in danger, I would never have left you alone. But I didn’t believe it was possible, because I knew how much he loved you.”

Revi met that with an unassailable wall of denial, honed by a lifetime of conviction. But now Dhara understood the power of shared images, and she gladly turned to the certainty of memories that to her were incontrovertible. These were the memories she had prepared in advance, the ones that would show Revi a different side of her father. And as she took them through a tour of family images, she began to recover her balance.

They saw Nishad’s immense pride and delight in his beautiful new baby girl, and watched him doting on her every giggle and smile. They saw him grinning with delight when she took her first steps, playing with her, putting her to sleep and staring down at her with adoration written all over his face. And then they saw a memory of an event that Revi had never known about—a childhood case of the Ankarian flu that had affected her lungs, filling them with fluid as fast as the hospital could safely pump it out. They saw Nishad pacing in her hospital room, sleeping in the cot beside her bed, reacting angrily to Dhara when she’d tried to get him to go home for a few hours of rest, and then breaking down into tears as he admitted his fear of losing his daughter.

Revi was stunned at the image of her father crying for her. But her armor reassembled itself quickly. “All right, so now I know he loved me when I was too young to talk back to him. That didn’t last.”

“It lasted all your life,” Dhara said with determination. More memories came through the link, of Nishad beaming with pride as Revi brought home top grades from her schools, and telling her You can do anything you set your mind to. You’re smarter than the rest. He glowed as he sat in the audience, watching her graduate from medical school, wanting to hug her afterward and tell her how he felt, but not knowing how. They saw the
same pride when she finished her Starfleet Academy command program, a memory that startled Revi.

“He hated my decision to join Starfleet! He never missed a chance to tell me I was making a mistake.”

“He really thought you were. But it was your dream, and you made it happen. He was always proud of you for pursuing your dreams.”

Still resistant, Revi said, “He was proud because my accomplishments reflected well on him. That’s not love.”

But Dhara wasn’t done yet. She shared a memory of standing behind Nishad when he opened their front door to see two Starfleet officers in dress uniforms waiting on their steps. They saw him in the living room as the officers gravely informed them that their daughter had been killed in action at Wolf 359, and they saw him afterwards, drinking himself into a stupor and telling Dhara to leave him alone. But she had checked in on him, worried more for him than for herself at the time, and one of the times she tiptoed to the study she found him sitting on the floor, his empty glass beside him, holding a photograph of Revi in his hand and talking to her image as he cried. He begged her not to be dead, to make it all some sort of mistake or misunderstanding. When Dhara came into the room he looked up at her, the tears coursing down his cheeks, and said I wish it had been me.

“I can’t do this anymore,” said Revi suddenly. In one swift motion she deactivated the transceiver and pulled it off her mother’s neck, holding it in her fist as she slumped against the couch. “It’s too much.”

Dhara seemed momentarily dazed, but she shook it off and faced her daughter. “I am so sorry. I honestly didn’t know. Not consciously. But I think...I think maybe I knew subconsciously. I just couldn’t accept it. But whatever he did, the fact remains that he loves you. Your father loves you.”

Revi looked at her in silence, then shook her head. “Maybe he does after all. And in some ways that actually makes it worse.” She tossed the transceiver on the coffee table. “Gods, I have a headache.”

“Me too,” said Dhara, rubbing her temples. “Is that normal?”

With a humorless laugh, Revi said, “Considering what we’ve just done? I’m surprised our heads are still attached.” She leaned forward, reaching for the medkit, and pulled out a hypospray. “I already had this loaded, just in case.”
Dhara tilted her head, accepting the injection, then watched as Revi injected herself. “What do we do now?” she asked.

Revi closed the medkit. “Now you go home.”

“What? Revi, please—we have to talk about this. Don’t shut me out now, I’ve just learned the truth and I don’t know how to deal with it!”

In a tired voice, Revi said, “Join the club, Mother. I have absolutely no idea what to do with the concept of a father who loved me but hurt me, and a mother who loved me but turned a blind eye. I thought that I could handle this, but it turns out I can’t. I’m sorry. Seven?”

“Revi—”

But Revi was already getting up off the couch, and Seven moved aside to give her room. “I’m sorry as well,” she said. “Revi has had enough.”

“But there’s still so much to say!”

“Not today,” said Revi. She paused, then half turned, not quite meeting her mother’s eyes as she added, “Thank you for coming. I know it was hard, and I appreciate the courage it took for you to do this.”

Dhara wiped an errant tear. “I’m starting to think my courage came too late.”

At this, Revi met her gaze directly. “Better late than never. Father will always be a coward, won’t he?”

Without another word she turned again and walked out of the living room. Dhara’s shoulders slumped as she gazed after her.

“Will she come back?”

Seven understood that the question was not literal. “I don’t believe you’ve finished your conversation yet,” she said. “But I don’t know when she’ll be ready again.”

Dhara nodded slowly. “No, I think this conversation has just started.” Looking up with red-rimmed eyes, she said, “Will you tell her that I’m not giving up on her?”

Though Seven knew Revi had already heard, she said, “Yes. I will.”
Evening found Alison still in her office. It was a good thing she had no personal life, because the way things were going, she now had two full-time jobs. During the day she was a CEO, and in the evenings she became a fund manager. But the pieces were starting to fall into place now, and she was actually beginning to enjoy it. It helped that both of her jobs had a mathematical basis at their heart.

She heard a tap on her door and looked up to see Ben poking his head in her office. “Dr. Necheyev? I didn’t get a chance to clean here last night; do you want me to now?”

Her first instinct was to say no, but she’d been working steadily for two hours and decided that she could use a break. “Sure, Ben,” she said. “Let me just get out of your way.”

He ducked back out as she saved her work and powered down the holoprojector. After a quick stop at the replicator for a glass of soda water, she walked out the door and found him waiting patiently by his cart. “It’s all yours,” she said.

“No, it’s yours,” he said. “I just borrow it for a few minutes.” With cleaning tools in both hands, he gave her a smiling nod and vanished through her door. Left to her own devices, she wandered down the hall with her soda water, heading for the only other occupied office.

“Commander?” she said from the open doorway.
Commander Tuvok looked up from his work. “Dr. Necheyev. I see you keep Vulcan hours.”

“I keep insane hours. Is that Vulcan?”

He raised an eyebrow. “That would depend upon your point of reference. Is there something I can help you with?”

“No. Sorry, I know I’m interrupting, but my office is being cleaned right now and I needed a breather. If you’re busy I’ll just head down to the lobby.”

“Please stay,” he said. “In truth I could use your assistance. Do you have access to any of the earlier versions of the slipstream drive final report?”

She shook her head. “We don’t have any other versions. That report was written by Dr. Trallek and sent to us from his lab on Ipsen Prime. We don’t do any editing of the reports from our grantees; that’s their responsibility.”

Steepling his fingers in front of him, he said, “I can find no evidence of tampering with that report, even down to the level of the underlying data blocks. Therefore, any changes to it must have been made in prior versions. Are you absolutely certain that the Foundation has had no access to any other version of this report?”

“I’m absolutely certain. I can get you interim reports, but I don’t think that will help since they don’t contain nearly the same information, and none of those were ever sent to Voyager.” A thought struck. “I have no idea if it would make a difference, but we do have the proceedings from last year’s conference. All of the grantees make presentations of their work once a year at our conference, and they submit an abstract prior to the event. It’s not a full report, but since it was done at the end of the research project, it’s the only prior version of anything close to it.”

His gaze grew more intent. “I would like very much to see that abstract.”

“That’s simple enough.” She indicated his terminal. “May I?”

“Of course.” He stood and presented his chair to her.

“Thank you.” Stepping around the desk, she sat down and quickly signed into the terminal. A moment later she accessed the proceedings, entered Trallek’s name, and pulled the abstract up on the screen. “Here we go.”

Tuvok bent over the terminal, reading with her. Within the short word
limit of all the abstracts, Dr. Trallek had described the object of his research, an extremely simple overview of the findings to date, and a one-sentence indication of the direction his future studies would take. It was this sentence that sent a chill down Alison’s spine.

*Future research will focus on the issue of phase variance and how existing or developing technology may be used to neutralize it.*

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “It’s been here all this time. There never was a mousetrap.”

“Indeed there was,” said Tuvok. “I don’t believe it’s a coincidence that between the conference and the final report, this little detail vanished. I do, however, believe it is time to contact Dr. Trallek.”

Alison was staring at the screen in disbelief. “Commander, I attended Dr. Trallek’s presentation. He never said this. He never even mentioned the phase variance.”

“Are you certain?”

“I’m positive! Believe me, I would have remembered when the subject came up later!” She looked up as he straightened. “I don’t understand it. Why would he change his findings?”

“I look forward to asking him that very question. Are you certain you would remember? I only ask because you did not recall this phrase in his abstract.”

“I probably never read it, or if I did, I just skimmed it. Those conferences are a madhouse for me. Five days of non-stop circulation and listening to scientists pitching their new proposals and maybe, if I can get away, managing to attend a presentation here and there. I’m more likely to choose which presentations to attend by what time they’re being given, not by their content.”

“Who else from the Foundation attends these conferences? Specifically, any of the board members?”

“The entire board takes part in the opening banquet. That’s more of a social event than a scientific one. Other than that, I rarely see any of them at the conference itself.”

“To your memory, did any of the board not attend the banquet at this conference?”

She gave it some thought, then shook her head. “No, they were all there. It would be unusual for any of them not to attend.”
“Then do you recall in particular whether you saw any of them at the conference itself?”

“Kirabo was there on the first day, and Carlos. Certainly none of the officers.”

He looked at the monitor again. “Shall we see what time it is at the lab?” Picking up his PADD, he downloaded the abstract with its contact data, then switched over to a Federation timebase, checked the result, and shook his head. “It’s 0300 hours there. We’ll get no answers now.” He paused, tapping one finger absently on the PADD. “Perhaps it’s just as well. On further consideration, I think it best to speak with Dr. Trallek in person. Thank you for your assistance, Dr. Necheyev. I must return to Starfleet Headquarters and arrange transportation.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

“There is no need, though I appreciate your offer.”

She walked him to the lift anyway, wishing him good fortune just before the doors shut. Slowly she turned and made her way back down the opposite hall, passing Ben’s cart two doors from her office. Good, he was done. She headed to her desk, her mind buzzing with the implications and possible explanations of Dr. Trallek’s mysterious deletion.

“There you are! I’ve been waiting for you.”

Alison let out a squeak of surprise, her heart pounding in her chest as she stared at the visitor sitting at her conference table. “God in heaven, you scared me!”

“I’m sorry,” said Elise. “I really didn’t mean to. You were lost in thought.”

“What are you doing here?” Surprise and the aftermath of fear gave her voice an edge, and Elise clearly caught it. Her easy manner vanished.

“I was taking you up on your promise,” she said, indicating a stasis bag on the table. “But perhaps I’ve come at a bad time. Ben knows I’m here; he said you’d only be gone a few minutes. I promise I haven’t touched anything.”

Her contrite attitude made Alison feel instantly guilty. She looked more closely at the bag and felt guiltier yet. “Guo Gao’s?”

“Chicken pad thai. It’s all yours, on one condition.”

“What’s that?” asked Alison as she walked across to the table.

“You have to eat it, not decorate me with it.”

Now feeling two centimeters tall, Alison sat down next to her. “Elise—
it’s my turn to apologize.” She held up her hand as Elise began to shake her head. “No, it is. I didn’t do it last night and I’m overdue now. I’m sorry for hurting you, and especially for the things I said afterward. I was…harsh. And it’s not my place to judge you or anyone else. I seem to be making a habit of that lately.”

“I accept your apology for the first part,” said Elise. “Even though it wasn’t your fault. But for the second part—you had some reason to say what you did. And frankly I deserved it.”

Alison didn’t know how to answer that, and Elise shot her a wry grin as she reached for the bag. “I see you’re not arguing with me. Good. Keep that up and we’ll be great friends.” The bag released a heavenly odor as she opened it and began laying out two cartons, chopsticks, napkins, and drinking cups.

“Thai iced tea? Hand that over,” demanded Alison. Elise looked pleased as she pushed the cup closer, and Alison closed her eyes at the first sip. “Oh, heaven. Nobody does this like Guo Gao’s.” Opening up her carton, she sniffed the aromatic steam, then wasted no time unwrapping her chopsticks. “Thank you so much for this. How did you know to go to Guo Gao’s?”

“I called Ben.”

“You did?” Alison stopped with her chopsticks halfway to her mouth. “That must have been an interesting conversation. Why did you think he’d know where my favorite Thai restaurant is?” She took her first bite and hummed with pleasure.

“It never occurred to me that he’d know where you eat out,” said Elise, delicately picking up a piece of chicken in her chopsticks. “But I knew he cleaned up a mess last night, and I hoped he’d remember the name on the stasis bag.” Her eyes widened as she tasted the chicken. “This is good. No wonder you love this place. Anyway, now I know that Ben knows all your hangouts. I have a list.”

“I see. Are you planning to bring me takeaway every night?”

“Well, I do have other engagements at times, but I’m sure something could be arranged on my free nights.”

Alison swallowed before she was quite ready, then took a hasty sip of tea. “That could seriously dent your budget,” she said, testing the waters.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be the one paying for it. You’ve got the big salary
now.” Elise winked as she took another bite, and Alison set her chopsticks back in her carton.

“What exactly are you saying?”

Elise pushed her own chopsticks in her carton, gracefully dabbed her mouth with her napkin, and said, “I’m saying I’ve known you for damn near seven years, and until last night I never had any idea who Alison Necheyev really was. You’re the kind of woman who will go to considerable trouble to protect a hundred and fifty people she’s never even met, just because it’s the right thing to do. I don’t have too many people like that in my social circle. Actually I don’t think I have any. So if you’re amenable, and if you didn’t accept my invitation last night just to be polite, I’d like to include you in that circle.”

“Include me in a different circle,” said Alison. “I know the people in that other one and I don’t have any desire to be in a circle with most of them, other than the one I already am for the Foundation.”

Elise laughed. “Those are my friends you’re talking about. I’ll have you know they’re not all bad. But I can guess the ones you’re referring to and to be honest, a lot of those relationships are built on expectation and obligation, not affection. And none of them are quite as brutally honest as that. Do you have any idea how refreshing it is to hear someone actually speak her mind?”

“Don’t tell me it took you seven years to figure that out about me.”

“No. It just took that long to figure out that it crosses over into the personal, too.” All levity vanished from her expression as she held Alison in an intent gaze. “You shook me up last night, and I mean that in a good way. I spent half the night thinking about it—about what you said, the way you see me, the fact that you’re working with Starfleet to find out who’s doing this to Lynne—and I realized something pretty important.”

“What’s that?” Alison found herself unable to look away.

“I don’t want to live my life in such a way that someone I respect can tell me I’ll never show any grace, and actually believe it.”

“Elise—” She was feeling worse and worse about that.

“No, let me finish. Please. Just now you apologized for being harsh and for judging me. But you didn’t apologize for what you actually said. You can’t, because you only said what you believed. It was your truth. And it shocked me to realize that most of it was true. I may not think of Lynne as my family, but in reality she is. And I didn’t just find that out a week and
a half ago, I knew it back when we first told you about her. Charles and I both did; there just wasn’t any other reasonable explanation. But I did absolutely nothing about that. You did. You tried to tell me at the reception, didn’t you? When you said it was our job to protect her too.”

“I was…surprised that you acknowledged her claim but didn’t seem to think she had any connection to you.”

“Surprised, right. Don’t start mincing words now. You were appalled; I saw it. But I honestly didn’t get it. I just saw her as a stranger who happened to share my name, and someone I’d be dealing with on a financial basis later. Then when she fired us and named you her fund manager, all I could think was that you must have pulled off one hell of a coup, and fooled everyone in the process. And I hate being made to look like a fool.” She saw the realization on Alison’s face and nodded. “Yes, that’s why I was such a bitch in the meeting. I’ve always liked and admired you, and it looked you’d taken all of us for a ride. It didn’t occur to me that the truth could be so simple as it was. Lynne trusts you because you gave her reason to. And she doesn’t trust us, because we didn’t do shit.” She picked up her chopsticks again. “I’ve got no one to blame for that but myself.”

Alison stirred her pad thai in the carton and took a bite, trying to figure out how she could possibly respond. Fortunately, Elise saved her the trouble.

“While I was wide awake thinking last night, I did a little research,” she said. “I’m not certain about this, because a lot of records were lost after the third world war, but I think we’re all descended from Lynne’s aunt—her father’s sister. So that makes her my cousin about eleven times removed, if you assume thirty-three years per generation.”

Alison couldn’t help but smile. “You found the family connection.”

More importantly, you looked for it.

“I think I found it. It made me realize that if she were in my own generation, she’d be as closely related to me as Adele. And while Adele and I aren’t great friends, we are family. If she needed help, I’d help her.” She shrugged. “So, though it may be much too late to hop on this particular wagon, I’d like to help Lynne if I can. But I don’t really know how. I mean, you said yourself I’m one of the top three suspects. She wouldn’t even let me come along on that tour you gave her on her first day here.”

“I think the best thing you can do right now is to rack your brain for
every possible bit of information you could give Commander Tuvok to help him with the investigation.” Alison reached for her tea. “The sooner Lynne is safe, the sooner she knows who she can trust.”

“I already did that. And I’ve been thinking about it all day. No matter how I look at it, I just can’t see anyone in this family being so brutally unconcerned about any person’s life, much less an entire ship full.”

“I’ve been having the same difficulty,” admitted Alison. “I spent the last year looking for motivation or clues or anything that might point to one of you. But I haven’t seen anything. Of course, I never realized that Charles was playing around with the Orion Syndicate, either.”

“God, Charles.” Elise groaned. “He called me today in a panic. Commander Tuvok didn’t waste any time questioning him. Scared him to death.”

“Commander Tuvok doesn’t have any time to waste,” Alison reminded her. “Neither does Lynne.”

“I know. It’s just…a little difficult for me to handle. Charles isn’t even my blood relation, but he feels more like family than Adele. And I betrayed his confidence. He was in a state, worrying about how Commander Tuvok had found out and whether that meant other people knew as well, because once the word gets back to Brian or Adele, he’s toasted. Neither one of them would ever approve of what he’s trying to do. At least, not at this point—they’ll approve retroactively if the result is good. And I knew that if I didn’t ease his mind, he’d just implode from sheer panic. So I told him that I was the one who’d informed Commander Tuvok.”

Alison was impressed. “And?”

“Let’s just say that I’m short a family member for the time being. One more reason to bring Lynne into the fold, eh?” She raised her cup in a mock toast, but her bravado didn’t hide the hurt.

“I’m sorry. That had to be extremely hard for you. But you did the right thing.”

“I’m not so sure as you. Is that what it takes to help Lynne? Betray my current family for the sake of a new member?”

For the first time, Alison realized just what a quandary Elise was in. What would she do if Aunt Alyynna were a serious suspect in an attempted murder case? Would she actively help the investigation?
No. Because I wouldn’t believe it was possible. Just like she doesn’t believe it’s possible.

And yet, Elise had told Tuvok about Charles. And now she was sitting in Alison’s office, sharing her thoughts and doubts over a takeaway meal that by itself said a great deal about the woman who’d bought it. She deserved more than the pat responses Alison had been giving her.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that if you discovered who’s responsible for this and didn’t tell Commander Tuvok, that would be a betrayal. Not just of Lynne, but of yourself, because you’d have to live with the guilt. And I don’t see you as being the kind of person who could carry that guilt easily.”

Elise looked at her closely. “Do you think you know me that well?”

This was a much easier one to answer. “Actually, I think I’ve known you for damn near seven years and only now am I getting any idea who you really are.”

The smile that earned her was oddly shy. They ate in silence for a few minutes, until Elise asked, “What is she like?”

Alison held up a finger as she finished chewing a bite.

“Sorry,” said Elise. “That was rude.”

Swallowing, Alison said, “Hey, I’m chewing on food that you brought me. Nothing rude about that.” She finished the last of her tea and looked regretfully at the empty cup.

“Here.” Elise slid hers over. “I’m not going to drink all of it.”

“You don’t mind sharing?”

“That depends entirely on the object being shared. In this case, no.”

“Well, thank you. But I suck down Thai iced tea like nobody’s business, so technically this might not be actual sharing.”

The half-nod Elise gave her silently acknowledged Alison’s dodge of the double entendre. “So, you were about to tell me what Lynne is like. Since I’ve wasted most of my chances to find out for myself.”

“I’m sure you’ll have more chances in the future, when this mess is over. But in the meantime, what you saw in the conference room was a good indicator. She’s intelligent, fearless, and she can take care of herself.”

“And she doesn’t tolerate anyone’s condescension.”

“You noticed that.” Alison took a shameless gulp of Elise’s tea.

“Hard to miss it. I think Adele is still spitting over it.” Her eyes crin-
kled in amusement. “Which is a mark in her favor as far as I’m concerned. Was she really assimilated by the Borg?”

Alison nodded.

“But she doesn’t have any implants. Not like Seven of Nine and Commander Sandovhar.”

Remembering Gutierrez’ shock when Lynne had bent the corner of his silver tray, Alison said, “She does, you just can’t see them.”

Elise looked at her knowingly. “I’m getting a lot of short answers here.”

“Yes, you are.” Alison fished a piece of chicken from her carton and held it up for emphasis. “They’re not my stories to tell. You’ll just have to get to know her yourself.” She popped the chicken in her mouth and wondered if she had room for the last few bites.

“I’ve been thinking about that.” Elise reached out and snagged her cup back. “But the question is, how do you invite someone in when they need bodyguards to come to your party?”

Alison had no answer for that.
Kathryn watched Lynne as she sat cross legged on their bedroom floor, giving Barney his last feeding of the evening. “What about Barnstorm?” she suggested.

Lynne made a face. “No.”

“But it has such a dashing sound to it!”

“No. What do you have against Barney?”

“I don’t know. It’s just so…plain.”

“Maybe you should call your dog Mollstorm instead.”

Kathryn had to chuckle at how stupid it sounded. “Okay, point taken. I guess I can live with Barney.” She swung her legs over the side of the bed, sitting with her elbows on her knees and her chin propped in her hands. “You know, you look beautiful. I think motherhood agrees with you.”

Lynne looked up, a bright smile making her even more lovely. “Thank you. Can’t say I ever thought I’d be a mother to a kitten, but…he’s already gotten to me.”

“Yes, I can see that.” And she could. She’d been so worried the previous night; Lynne just didn’t need anything else complicating her life. And she had never been a pet person. She’d said her itinerant lifestyle simply didn’t allow it. Hell, she hadn’t even had houseplants in her climbing days. And she certainly didn’t respond to Molly with any real affection. She was unfailingly polite, and gave Molly an occasional scratch.
or pet, but it seemed more of a social obligation than anything else. At first Kathryn had thought that she simply needed time to adapt to the concept of a pet, but after a while she’d realized that the feelings just weren’t there. So when Lynne had insisted on saving the kitten, Kathryn had assumed it would be just one more burden.

Gretchen had known otherwise. Kathryn hadn’t really believed her when she’d said Lynne needed that kitten, but looking at them now, she could see the truth of it. When Lynne was focused on Barney, there was a peace in her features that had been absent for too long.

“From telling the President of the United Federation of Planets to go to hell in the morning, to bottle feeding a kitten at night,” she mused. “You are truly a do-everything kind of woman.”

“Everything in its proper place and time,” said Lynne. “I don’t think I’d have been nearly so effective telling the President to go to hell in my jeans and sweatshirt, with an orphaned kitten in my hands.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. It might have been even more effective.” Kathryn kind of liked the scene her imagination conjured.

“Well, I’m not the only do-everything woman. Sitting over there on that bed, also in jeans and a sweatshirt, is the same woman who spent her morning in a ticker tape parade, and her afternoon in the studios of every big-name reporter in the Federation.”

Kathryn waved that off. “I’d rather have been here, watching you do this. He is a cute little bugger,” she added, knowing Lynne would love the word choice.

“Bugger?” Lynne laughed outright, leaving Kathryn a little confused. It wasn’t that funny. “Yes, he is. But I’m thinking I should probably tell you the other meaning of that word.”

“I thought it was just an affectionate diminutive.”

“It is, where I came from. But over the pond in Britain it meant something else. It was a slang term for a sodomite. Or for the act of sodomy. Or just as a synonym for fuck.”

“Oh, for god’s sake. I cannot believe how many words you have in your vocabulary for sexual activities.”

“Hey, I didn’t make this stuff up.” Lynne eased the bottle away from Barney’s mouth and set it on the floor. “Full up, are you? Okay, let’s get the air out.” She tossed a hand towel over her shoulder, held him gently up against it and patted his back until a tiny belch emerged. Kathryn
covered her mouth; she’d rarely seen anything so damn cute as Lynne burping the kitten.

“I see you chortling over there.” Lynne brought Barney back down and set him by his heating pad. “It’s not his fault that he gets air in his little tummy from sucking on a bottle. Is it, Barney? If you had your mama that wouldn’t be a problem.” He wobbled over the floor, squeaking as he tried to explore more interesting places but was hindered by Lynne’s hands. “Oh, no you don’t. We still have one more job to do.”

“Time to brush my teeth,” announced Kathryn, jumping up from the bed.

“Yeah, I know. I’m surprised you’re even staying in the same room. Last night I thought you might have transported back to Voyager.”

Kathryn felt no guilt. “There’s a reason I had puppies and not kittens.”

“Oh, because it’s soooo much easier to potty train a puppy. You just wait until Barney’s old enough to figure out the litter box. Then you’ll envy me.”

“No I won’t, because I’m going to have to live with that litter box.” As Lynne laid the hand towel on the pad and took out the small wet cloth, Kathryn beat a hasty retreat to the bathroom. She spent an inordinate amount of time cleaning her teeth, running a little cool water over her face, brushing her hair, and in general taking care of every possible aspect of bedtime hygiene that she could think of. By the time she finally emerged, she could see at a glance that her strategy had been successful. The towel and cloth were nowhere to be seen, and Barney was back in his box with Lynne petting the living daylights out of him.

“You’re going to pet all his fur off before he even finishes growing it in,” she said, sitting on the floor beside them.

“Nah. He’s tougher than that. Besides, socialization is critical at this stage. The more I pet and play with him, the smarter and happier and more well-adjusted he’ll be.”

“Your parents must have petted you a lot, then.”

Lynne stopped and looked at her with a loving smile. “You are so sweet sometimes. Come here.”

Kathryn enjoyed her reward as Lynne focused all of her attention on their kiss, using hands and teeth and tongue to get her message across. When they finally separated, it took Kathryn a moment to open her eyes. Then she frowned. “Wait. You did sterilize your hands, right?”
“Christ, you make points and then you lose them right afterward.” Lynne shook her head in mock despair as she turned to pet Barney again. “For the record, your parents obviously petted you a lot, too.”

Kathryn joined in, running her fingers through Barney’s short, silky fur. He nuzzled their hands, squirming and rubbing. “Do you think he misses his littermate?” she asked.

“According to what I read today, he’s too young to have any awareness of having lost a littermate, but he’s programmed to seek out warmth and other bodies. That’s why he’s rubbing against us. Right now our hands are his littermates.”

They fell silent as they played with him. Finally, Kathryn said, “I don’t think Revi’s parents petted her enough.”

Lynne sighed. “I was thinking about that, too. It worries me that we haven’t heard from her yet.”

“Seven said she’d call when Revi was ready to see anyone. I just wish I knew what happened.”

“I can guess,” said Lynne. “There’s no hiding in an interlink. Sometimes, the truth doesn’t set you free.”

“I don’t believe that. It’s always better to know the truth. Even if you don’t like what you see, at least you can start dealing with it.”

“Well, that works for you and me. Does it work for Revi?”

After another long pause, Kathryn asked, “Do you know the truth?”

Lynne nodded. “Like I said, there’s no hiding in an interlink. It’s not that Revi wanted to show me, or that I ever looked for it. But memories are funny things. They pop out even when you’re thinking about something unrelated. Did she ever tell you?”

“No, not in so many words. But I have a pretty strong suspicion. She shuts down whenever the topic of her father comes up. Which isn’t very often.”

“She shuts down for a good reason. Her father was a bastard.”

It was strange how difficult it was to say the words; to put her suspicions into a concrete question. “He abused her, didn’t he?”

Lynne met her eyes and hesitated. “Yeah, he did,” she said finally. “From the time she was eleven or twelve until she moved out to go to university. I think the worst of it was when she was younger, though.”

“He was a bastard.” Though she’d never met the man, she found
herself wishing she could get him alone in a room for just five minutes. How could anyone hurt Revi?

“And the irony is, she still craves his approval. She wants something she’ll never get.”

“That explains a lot.”

“I know.” Lynne sighed. “I was so hopeful for her last week. I really thought that even a bastard might change his spots when his long-lost daughter reappeared. Now I feel guilty for encouraging her to go visit them.”

“Sweetheart, you can’t take that on. It was always her choice. Besides, even if her father did exactly what she said he’d do, her mother seems to have been something of a surprise. It takes a lot of courage to go against a lifetime’s worth of prejudice, not to mention a disapproving husband, and do what she did.”

“True. I just wish I could be sure it will end up being a positive thing.”

Kathryn scratched Barney on the cheek while musing over this new piece of information. She remembered Revi coming back from her counseling session with Troi and saying that she had more than her Borg past to work on. This must have been what she’d been referring to.

“You know, it’s funny,” she said, thinking out loud. “I thought I knew everything about Revi. I mean, we almost literally lived her life during her Gifting on Terellia. But now that I think about it, we really didn’t see much of her later childhood. We skipped right over to her first meeting with Steph, and everything that happened afterward. Do you think she actually controlled that?”

“I know she did,” said Lynne. “That’s the main reason she went after Seven, because she knew she had enough experience to control that interface. Of all the people on Voyager, Revi was the one person who could actually do a Gifting on her own terms.”

“She told me that she was only barely able to guide the process. I didn’t realize she meant she’d been able to keep some memories from being displayed. But why those? My god, she shared the most horrible memories imaginable. And the most intimate,” she added, remembering the memory of Revi and Seven’s reconciliation after their estrangement. That one still made her skin heat up.

“I’ve wondered that, too. My guess is that it’s the one thing she’s never even begun to deal with.”
“And now she is.” Kathryn wished she could hold Revi in her arms and protect her from all this. Thank heavens she had Seven.

Barney finally curled up and went to sleep, ending the petting session. Lynne tucked his towel around him and said, “You know what?”

“What?”

“I think I’m ready to watch a message from my parents.”

Lynne hadn’t touched that PADD since the night she’d discovered her father’s possible death in Denver, and after their initial talk, Kathryn had carefully stayed away from the topic. Now she felt a rush of relief.

“Would you like some company while you watch?” she asked.

“What I’d like is for us to snuggle up in bed and watch it together.”

Kathryn leaned over to kiss the side of her jaw. “It would be my very great pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.” As they rose from the floor, she asked, “Does this have anything to do with Revi?”

“Yeah, it does. If she has the courage to face what she’s dealing with right now, I sure as hell ought to have the courage to watch a message from my parents. They loved me so much that they made sure I never doubted it, almost four centuries later.” Lynne opened the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out the PADD. “I think I’ve been an ass for letting proactive guilt keep me from feeling that love.”

“I don’t think you ever stopped feeling it. You just weren’t able to look it in the face for a few days.”

They settled in bed, sitting up against the headboard with the pillows behind their backs. Lynne scrolled through the PADD, found the next message, and pulled it up. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

She tapped the control, and the PADD came to life.

“Hey, squirt,” said John Hamilton.

“Hi, Lynne.” Elizabeth smiled. “It’s July 24, 2004. Three years since you’ve been gone and we miss you every day.”

“But my god, did you ever leave at a good time,” John said. “We’re now embroiled in what has to be the most miserable presidential campaign of all time. Be glad you’re missing it. I cannot believe the idiocy—”

“John! Are you going to spend this message talking about politics?”

He grinned sheepishly. “I miss ranting about it with her.”

Lynne paused the playback. “They’re in the kitchen this time,” she
said somewhat unnecessarily, as Kathryn had already deduced it. “I can’t
tell you how many times Dad and I sat at that table and ranted about
politics.”

“—and you won’t give me the satisfaction,” John continued as Lynne
resumed the playback.

“That’s because I like my blood pressure right where it is,” retorted
Elizabeth. “Shall we give her the news she might be more interested in?”
Facing back toward the PADD, she said, “Your friend Digger called us.
He’s getting married this September.”

“Digger’s getting married?!” Lynne’s exclamation was so loud that
Kathryn winced.

“He said that we’d like his fiancée because she’s so much like you,”
Elizabeth finished.

“Yeah,” said John, “with the notable exception that she’ll have him and
you wouldn’t.”

Lynne snickered.

“Anyway, he’s extremely happy, and you know he doesn’t really get on
with his family, but he wanted to share his news with somebody, so he
called us. I’m really glad to see it. He deserves a little happiness.”

John nodded in agreement. “I always did like him. But not for a son-in-
law!” he added, raising a finger. “That would have been a disaster.”

“God yes,” said Elizabeth and Lynne at the same time. This time
Kathryn snickered.

“And there are wedding bells right here in town, too,” said Elizabeth.

“Oh, this is big news,” added John.

“Do you remember Robert Penney? The postmaster for our post office?
He retired this year. And for once the United States Postal Service did
something right. Instead of bringing someone in from outside, they
promoted Phil, our mailman. And the moment Phil got his promotion he
went right over to Sue Ellen’s house and asked her to marry him.”

“Those two have been courting for five years,” said John. “I didn’t
think Phil had it in him. He said he was just waiting until he had some-
thing to offer.”

“Why do men still think that they have to be the providers?” asked
Elizabeth. “I mean, this is the twenty-first century. Sue Ellen makes a fine
salary all by herself. And a good thing, too, because if she’d been waiting
for Phil to provide for her she’d have starved half a decade ago.”
“Don’t ask me, love, I didn’t wait more than a few months to snatch you up.”

*He calls her ‘love’?* thought Kathryn.

“And knocked me up not too much later, as I recall,” said Elizabeth with a smile.

“Oh! Speaking of that…” John grinned. “Your cousin Teresa just had a little boy. His name is Richard Hamilton Monroe—named after both of his grandfathers.”

“He’s a cutie. Teresa sent photos. Actually Teresa sent about eight thousand photos.”

Lynne snorted. “I bet.”

John was shaking his head. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate a nice baby photo, but there are really only so many ways you can capture the varying moods of a baby’s ass.”

Lynne laughed so hard that she missed Elizabeth’s response and had to watch it again. The entire message was full of the minutia of family life, small town life, and news of Lynne’s friends, related with the humorous give-and-take that seemed to be a natural part of John and Elizabeth’s relationship. Kathryn found herself watching the interactions between them closely, seeing so much of Lynne in both of them—and more importantly, seeing the role models Lynne had learned from. It suddenly occurred to her that she and Lynne related to each other in much the same way. And yet, when they’d first met, neither one of them had been nearly so comfortable in their own skins as John and Elizabeth. She’d still been trapped in her role of captain, having spent five years pushing down her own personal needs, and Lynne had been utterly lost after being torn from everything she knew.

*Look how far we’ve come,* she thought. *We look like them now.* She wondered what Lynne had seen in her, back in the beginning, that had ever made her think they could end up like this.

When the message ended, Lynne deactivated the PADD, set it on the table, and turned back to burrow into Kathryn. “Would you just hold me for a minute?” she asked.

“Come on, let’s get more comfortable. Then I can hold you for longer than a minute.”

They rearranged the pillows and laid down, with Lynne immediately snuggling in and resting her head on Kathryn’s shoulder. Kathryn
wrapped an arm around her back and pulled her closer, kissing her forehead. “How are you?”

“Okay.”

Kathryn gave her thirty seconds to come up with a more specific answer, then kissed her again and began running her fingers through the thick hair that she always loved to touch. “Want to try that one more time?” she asked gently.

“Mmm. I love it when you do that.”

“I know.” She smiled. “Remember the first time I did this?”

Lynne’s body moved with her chuckle. “Oh yeah. I believe I had you half naked, and then you pretty much ripped my shirt off, got me all excited about what was coming next—and decided that you wanted to play with my hair instead.”

“Well, in fairness to me, I had been fantasizing for weeks about getting your hair out of that braid and playing with it.”

“So, I was fantasizing about making love to you, and you were fantasizing about making love to my hair.”

Kathryn laughed out loud, then wrapped both arms around Lynne and squeezed her tightly. “I love you.”

Lynne shifted enough to look into her eyes. “I love you too. More than I can ever say.”

They shared a slow, gentle, lingering kiss, and Lynne settled back again. Happily, Kathryn resumed her prior activity. “So, how are you?”

“I’m okay, really. I just needed you.”

“You always have me.”

Lynne dropped a kiss on the skin beneath her cheek. “I know. And I guess the longer answer to your question is that I’m feeling happy and sad all at the same time. What you saw there—that was so typical of them. That’s how they are...I mean, were. God, I get my tenses confused when I’m thinking about this. Anyway...I think these messages are like a narcotic. I love them while I’m watching, but once the high is over there’s a crash.”

Kathryn squeezed her again. “Is the high worth it?”

“Oh, yes. Absolutely. I guess I can see why you’d have to ask, but—I can’t even explain how much these messages mean to me. Even if they make me feel guilty.”

“I just wish they didn’t.”
“Well, it’s not as bad as it was. I think it’s starting to sink in that Dad really was getting on in years when he died. But I have to warn you that when I get to that particular message, I’m going to be a total basket case. You’ll have to pick me up and pour me into bed.”

“You know I will,” whispered Kathryn, kissing her again.

The silence of the sleeping house settled around them, and for long minutes Kathryn simply enjoyed the peace of the moment. At last Lynne stirred. “I have to move.”

“I know.” Kathryn resigned herself to losing her. Lynne didn’t often snuggle in that way, and when she did, it never lasted long. She shifted onto her side, facing Lynne and hoping their night wouldn’t end just yet. Lynne did the same thing, looking at her from her pillow with a serious expression.

“I’m really sorry I couldn’t be there today.”

“At the parade?” asked Kathryn incredulously.

She nodded. “It was the culmination of your success, and I was halfway around the world.”

“Lynne, that was not the culmination of my success. That moment came when we landed in front of Starfleet Headquarters and powered down the engines. That’s when I knew I was done. That was the important moment, and you were there for it.” Kathryn remembered the crowds at the parade, the completely uncontrollable security situation, and the instinctive fear she’d felt when Susanna Martin had pulled out that holographic sign projector. “There is absolutely no way you could have been there today. I’d have been so afraid for you that I couldn’t have functioned. It would have been impossible to keep you safe.”

Lynne sighed. “I want this to be over.”

“I know. Me too.” Wanting to change the subject, she said, “Actually I’d rather have been a fly on the wall for your meeting than in that parade. I think that’s where the real excitement was today.”

It worked. A small smile touched Lynne’s mouth as she said, “I have to admit I’m pretty proud of that. My first time imitating you, and it worked out perfectly.”

“Oh, no, you weren’t imitating me. I’d have taken the first offer. I really don’t think I’d have pushed it as far as you did.”

“Kathryn Janeway, you are full of it. You know damn well that if you’d
been in my place, and Gutierrez had threatened me, you’d have cut his balls off and fed them to him.”

Kathryn wrinkled her nose. “That’s a disgusting image.”

“But it’s true.”

She thought about it. “Yes, it is,” she admitted. “I tend to lose my grasp on practicality when it comes to you.”

Lynne reached out for her hand. “I know. I love that about you.” She pulled the hand closer and planted a soft kiss on the palm, then tucked it under her chin and closed her eyes. “Anyway, the important thing is that in another week we can start planning a huge party for everyone.”

“Now that’s a function I’ll look forward to. Did I mention how proud I am of you for pulling that off?”

“Well, you might have said something to that effect after you got home.”

In reality, Kathryn had whooped with delight upon learning that Lynne had done what neither she nor Admiral Necheyev had had the power or the clout to do. When Lynne had first told her of the plan, Kathryn had been concerned about her usage of the Foundation mission as leverage, and whether that would impact her future relationship with the rest of the board. But Lynne had adamantly stated that the Maquis crewmembers were far more important than a bunch of people she didn’t even know, and that had pretty well ended any objections.

“Maybe I should say it again. I’m ridiculously proud of you, and a little in awe as well, and I wish I could have seen it. I wish I could have seen Alison’s reaction, too.”

“She’s convinced I’m insane.”

“Well, you are. But in a good way.”

“I suppose that is why we get along so well.”

They fell silent, and after a few minutes Kathryn carefully extracted her hand and brushed it over Lynne’s cheek. “Goodnight, sweetheart.”

Lynne didn’t open her eyes. “Goodnight, love.”

Kathryn rolled over and scooted backward, smiling as Lynne’s arm came around her waist and possessively pulled her in tighter. These were the moments when everything else simply fell away. Really, there was nothing in the world so important as this.

She lay in the darkness, relaxed but wide awake, and thought about John and Elizabeth Hamilton and how much they had loved their daugh-
ter. And yet, those messages were all Lynne had left of them. Seven had lost her parents as well. Revi, on the other hand, still had both of her parents—but not that kind of love.

But she herself was somewhere in between. She had lost one loving parent, but the other was down the hall right now, sleeping in her bed. Suddenly Kathryn missed her.

*First thing in the morning, I’m giving Mom a big, long hug.*
Gretchen was having another of those nights. She threw the covers back with a sigh, put on her thick robe and slippers, and went quietly down the hall. At Kathryn and Lynne’s door she paused, listening, but heard nothing at all. Well, it was too early for Lynne to be waking up yet. Funny, though, how quickly she’d gotten accustomed to having company in her insomnia, and how much she missed it when it wasn’t available.

She made her way downstairs, closed the kitchen door, turned up the environmental controls for the room and set about making a cup of tea. As it steeped she paused to look out the window, noting that the predicted snow had indeed arrived. Fat flakes were drifting down, glowing briefly in the light from her window before vanishing into the darkness again. Well, that would give Lynne a way of burning off some energy in the morning—the paths would need to be shoveled again.

She had finished her tea and read through a chapter and a half of her book when the console on the wall chirped. Startled and more than a little nervous, she got up to see who was it was. Calls at this time of night were never good news. But the ID on the panel was the last thing she’d expected, and she accepted the call with relief.

Revi looked out at her apologetically. “I’m sorry to bother you so late, Gretchen. But I saw your light on…” She hesitated.
“No need to apologize; I’m wide awake. Are you all right?” She wanted to say *we’ve all been worried about you*, but held her tongue.

“I’m fine. I just wondered if…if I could come over.”

“I wish you would. I was just sitting here thinking that it’s not much fun being awake in the middle of the night with no one for company. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“I’d love it.” Revi’s gratitude was far too apparent. “Thank you, I’ll be right over.”

She clicked off without another word, and Gretchen blinked at the dark screen for a moment before shaking her head and moving over to the counter. *Chamomile, I think.*

For once Revi walked right in, the snowflakes still melting in her hair as she came into the kitchen. “Hi. Thank you for having me over, I really appreciate this.”

Gretchen held out the cup and saucer. “Chamomile. It soothes a tired mind.” As Revi took the cup, she added, “And there’s no need to thank me. I love your company.”

“You might not love it right now,” Revi muttered.

Gretchen ignored the comment, waiting until they were both seated before she said, “Seven told us that you might not be available for a while. I’m really glad to see you.”

Revi studiously looked at her tea. “Seven’s been holding me together. I had a pretty rough talk with my mother today.”

“A talk, or an interlink?”

Looking up, Revi said, “She told you that?”

“No. Lynne knew why Dhara was here.”

“Oh, right. I forgot. My brain’s not working too well.”

“Well then, you’re probably just operating at the same level as the rest of us. Welcome to normalcy.”

Revi snorted. “I don’t know what normal is anymore.” She turned her cup in its saucer. “Gretchen, I don’t know anyone else I can talk to about this. Seven’s killing herself trying to help, but this is one thing she simply can’t understand. And I don’t know if you can, either, but maybe you can answer a question for me.”

“I’ll do my absolute best.”

That earned her a tiny, short-lived smile. “I know you will.”
When nothing more was forthcoming, Gretchen prodded gently. “That is, I’ll do my best once I know what the question is.”

“Right. Okay. I’m asking you this because you’re a mother and maybe you can imagine the situation. Not because I think you would ever do this, or let it happen in your own family, because I know you wouldn’t.”

Gretchen wasn’t sure what this was leading to, but it didn’t sound good. “All right, I have the caveat. What is this hypothetical situation?”

Revi took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly as she met Gretchen’s eyes. “If you ever suspected that your husband was…was being unnecessarily rough in his physical discipline to your daughters, what would you have done?”

She’d known it was something bad, but she hadn’t expected this. She wasn’t sure she’d done a very good job of keeping the horror off her face, but Revi didn’t show any sign of seeing it.

“Well, I…I guess I’d try…my god, Revi, that’s a difficult one. I’ve never believed that physical discipline was ever necessary, period. There are so many other ways to teach a child. I’m having a hard time picturing this scenario.”

“That’s because you’re a good mother,” said Revi flatly. “But try to imagine it. Try to imagine that you consider the occasional slap to the face, or shaking, or shoving to be perfectly normal, if perhaps a tad harsh. But now you suspect that when your husband marches your daughter into her bedroom to discipline her, there’s more going on. That it might be more than a bit harsh. What would you do?”

Rarely had Gretchen felt so trapped. There couldn’t possibly be a right answer to this, but Revi was looking at her like she held the key to everything. Because she was a mother.

“If I suspected that,” she said, “then I would make sure I was right behind my husband when he marched my daughter off. I would not allow that to take place behind a closed door.” A flash of raw pain crossed Revi’s face, and Gretchen felt a surge of protectiveness that made it hard to sit still. She wanted to hug this woman fiercely, to tell her that nothing and no one would ever hurt her again. But what Revi needed right now was very careful handling, and with some difficulty she stayed in her chair and asked, “Are we talking about physical abuse, or sexual?”

“Physical.” Revi gave a small snort. “I guess I should be thankful for
small favors. No, Father never crossed that line. I don’t think it was ever about him, or his urges. It was always about me not living up to his expectations. It was punishment for not being what he wanted me to be.” She shook her head. “He wanted a perfect, unquestioning, obedient girl. And I just couldn’t do it. Even when I knew my mouth would get me in trouble.”

Gretchen needed a moment to fight down her anger. In those few words, Revi had given her a tremendous insight into the woman she’d become.

“Most youngsters’ mouths get them into trouble,” she said. “It’s part of being a child, and testing boundaries.”

“I tested mine all the damn time,” said Revi. “But I couldn’t tell you why. I knew perfectly well where those boundaries were, and what the consequences were of going past them. But I did it anyway.”

“And you think those consequences were your fault, don’t you?”


“But somewhere deep down you believe it,” finished Gretchen. “Revi, I don’t know how to convince you if you can’t convince yourself. But speaking as a mother, what your father did was unacceptable. It was his responsibility, not yours. You asked what I would do if my husband had done that? I’d have taken him straight to counseling to learn anger management, because if he was beating our daughter then there was clearly something else going on besides normal parental discipline. And I would have spoken to my daughter so that she understood what was and wasn’t acceptable in that situation, and that she knew to tell me if it went beyond the bounds of acceptable. And if that didn’t resolve the problem, or if my husband refused to address the issue…” She pursed her lips. “Well, I’d have severed the marital contract. My primary duty is to my child.”

“Gods.” Revi pushed her teacup away and rested her forehead on her hand. “I wish you were my mother.”

“What did your mother do?”

“Nothing. She didn’t do a damned thing.”

The quiet response conveyed such a deep pain that for a moment Gretchen’s mind went blank. She simply had no idea what to say. The impression she’d gotten from her short meeting with Dhara Sandovhar didn’t match with a woman who could be so careless of her daughter’s
welfare. Nor did Lynne’s explanation of why Dhara had come, and what she must have overcome in order to do it. It just didn’t add up.

In lieu of words, she rose from her chair and moved to the one next to Revi. Scooting it so that they were touching, she wrapped an arm around Revi’s bent back, silently offering a hug.

Revi raised her head and leaned into her, accepting the comfort. “I don’t understand. All this time I thought she just didn’t love me enough to protect me. But it’s not true. I felt it in our interlink; you can’t hide emotions when someone’s inside your mind. She really does love me.”

“I can’t imagine that she wouldn’t. You’re her daughter.”

“Then why? Why did she let it happen?”

Gretchen shifted slightly, letting Revi’s head rest on her shoulder and instinctively dropping a soft kiss on the top of it. “Did she know it was happening?”

“Do you know, I can’t even answer that question. You’d think it would be simple enough, wouldn’t you? Either she knew, or she didn’t. But it seems to be something in between. She suspected, but she didn’t want to know, so she never let herself know. I think she’d still be denying it even now, but she couldn’t deny my memories.”

That clarified things a little. “Love is the most complicated emotion there is. If your mother loves your father, she would have found it nearly impossible to accept that he was hurting you. We’re all capable of astonishing feats of rationalization to avoid seeing an unacceptable truth.”

Revi was silent for a moment. “She does love him,” she said at last. “And they’re very traditional. I’m not sure if my mother would agree with you about her primary responsibility. She might consider that to be to her husband, not to me.”

Gretchen doubted that. “It’s possible,” she said. “But as a mother I have to tell you, something shifts inside you when you give birth. I loved Edward fiercely, and I’d have done anything in the world for him. But when I saw Kathryn for the first time, everything changed. You’re a doctor, Revi, you know there’s a hormonal basis for this. Mothers of all species are chemically programmed to put their children before anything else.”

“I think maybe my mother got the wrong hormonal signal,” said Revi bitterly.

“Revi…” Gretchen’s heart ached for her. “Your mother came here
specifically to reach out to you, in a manner that probably scared her half to death. And Lynne said that your father is adamantly prejudiced against telepaths. So it sounds to me like Dhara defied your father in order to make this connection with you.”

Revi straightened, pulling away and turning her chair so that they faced each other. “Actually she just didn’t tell him what she was doing. But you’re right. She went against what she knew he’d say.” She ran a hand through her hair, sighing. “I just don’t know how to deal with it. I don’t understand the choices my mother made when I was in their house. I wouldn’t have made them, you wouldn’t have made them, nobody I know would have made them. But Mother did. And yet she loves me. That’s the part that keeps tripping me up. When I believed she didn’t really love me, then it made sense. But to love me and still let it happen…”

“It’s a betrayal,” said Gretchen.

“Yes! Of the worst kind.”

“From what I know of this situation, you have every right to feel betrayed. A child has the right to expect protection from her parents. It’s fundamental. You were denied that, and because the right is fundamental, so is the pain when it’s denied. That is very real, and it’s a very deep part of you.” She reached out for Revi’s hand and held it in her own. “But a mother has a similar right to expect that her partner, the parent of her child, will protect that child. It’s almost as fundamental. And the pain of knowing that he was violating that trust would be almost unimaginable. If I put myself in your mother’s shoes—if I try to imagine that Edward was hurting Kathryn or Phoebe—my god, my heart hurts just thinking about it. I would have been truly unable to believe it unless the evidence was in my face. Now I am in no way excusing your mother’s lack of action. But I can understand the very, very powerful motivation not to see something that would cause so much pain.”

Revi looked at her thoughtfully. “When she finally accepted it today, she was hurt. I barely even noticed, I was so wrapped up in what I was feeling. But she was in a lot of pain, just like you said. Shocked. Horrified. And she was apologizing for failing me. And then she turned it around to my father, like she always did, defending him. Even in the face of everything she’d seen, even after telling me she was sorry for failing me, even after accepting the blame for herself, she was still defending him. It is that powerful, isn’t it?”
Gretchen nodded. “I don’t know anything about your parents’ relationship, but just from what you’re saying, it may not be him that she’s defending. She may be defending her belief in him.”

“Gods. I think you’re right.” Revi pulled her teacup back and took a sip. “Do you know what the weirdest thing about this whole day was?”

“What?”

Setting the cup down, she looked at Gretchen and said, “I found out my father loves me. And I honestly don’t care.”
Kathryn zipped her jacket up to her chin and closed the door behind her, squinting at the brilliant sunlight on the unbroken blanket of snow. She had always loved a fresh snowfall. There was something about the untouched perfection of it that made her pause to simply absorb the peace and beauty of the scene.

And then there was the great satisfaction in being the first one to leave prints. With a big smile, she stepped out from the shelter of the porch overhang and felt her boot sink in. They must have gotten fifteen centimeters last night; Revi’s prints from her early morning visit were already covered. And it was her favorite kind of snow, too—the dry kind, that squeaked as she compressed it. She’d forgotten how much she enjoyed that sound, and spent a few seconds patting her boot here and there, just for the fun of hearing it squeak.

Having thoroughly destroyed the smooth snow on the porch and steps, she finally began the trek to the guest house, a lifetime of familiarity allowing her to stay on the invisible path. Her boot tracks would serve as a guide for Lynne, who had eagerly accepted Gretchen’s ‘offer’ to shovel the walk this morning. Just for a moment, she considered laying out a false path, but her sense of fair play got the better of her. Well, that and the knowledge that Gretchen would give her no end of grief if Lynne ended up shoveling her lawn or flower beds.
Carefully she walked up the steps of the guest house, staying by the rail in case there was ice under the snow. Stairs were always the worst due to their exposure. Indeed, her boot slipped twice, but she caught herself easily and made it to the porch with no trouble. With a hand already cold from gripping the snow-covered railing, she rang the chime.

To her surprise, it was Revi who answered. “Kathryn, good morning.”

“Good morning.” She paused, taken aback at how…normal Revi looked. “I was heading out to work, but I wanted to stop in first and see how you’re doing. Is everything all right?”

Revi stepped back, inviting her in. “I guess that would depend on your definitions of ‘everything’ and ‘all right’.”

“Okay. ‘Everything’ meaning you, I suppose, and your state of mind.” She gratefully entered the warmth of the hall and stood on the interior mat. “And ‘all right’ meaning...well, hell. I’ve only had one cup of coffee so far, do you have to ask such hard questions? How are you?”

A small smile crossed Revi’s face. “Can I get you another cup of coffee? I’d be curious to see if it actually helps.”

“No, thank you. It probably wouldn’t.” Kathryn waited.

“I’m better,” said Revi. “Got a few unpleasant truths pounded into me yesterday, though. Did Gretchen tell you?”

Kathryn shook her head. “She only said that you and she had a long talk last night. And that it wasn’t her place to share any of it.” She could see the impact of that in Revi’s eyes.

“Your mother is special, Kathryn.”

“I know. I think I’m just starting to understand that myself.” She didn’t mention the long hug she’d given Gretchen this morning, or the way her mother had held on more tightly than usual. Given Revi’s sensitivity at the moment, it just didn’t seem kind.

Nodding, Revi said, “Funny how it can take so long for us to see our parents as adult Humans instead of parents.”

“Is that what happened yesterday?”

A pause. “I think so. That’s a good way of putting it, actually. So I suppose I’m just adapting to the concept. All my life I felt betrayed because they weren’t more than they were. And now I have to accept that they never will be.” She reached out to brush a bit of melting snow off Kathryn’s jacket. “How much time do you have? Enough to come in?”

“Yes, but—is twenty minutes enough for us to talk?”
“No. But it’s enough to tell you a few things I should have told you a while ago.”

“There is nothing you ‘should have’ told me. There’s only what you want to share.”

“Point taken.”

Kathryn crouched down to loosen her boot straps. “That said, though, I’m glad you want to share it with me. That means a lot. I’ve been really worried about you. So has Lynne.”

“Like Lynne needs anything else to worry about. She’s got family issues of her own.”

Kathryn paused, looking up. “Have you still not figured out that you and Seven are her family?”

“Ah…” Revi looked embarrassed and gratified at the same time.

“And mine, too.” Kathryn stood up, pulled her feet out of the boots, and stepped closer to Revi. “Can I give my family member a hug?”

Revi opened her arms in answer, and Kathryn gratefully embraced her. It was selfish and ridiculous and very small of her, but she’d been a little hurt to learn that Revi had gone to Gretchen for comfort instead of her. The hug helped erase some of that.

By the time she left for work she understood exactly why Revi had gone to Gretchen. And the first thing she did upon arriving at Starfleet Headquarters was something completely out of character. After authorizing her spontaneous purchase, she ended the call and smiled to herself, wishing she could be home to see her mother’s face.

_Better late than never, right?_

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_Tuvok looked up as the office door opened, admitting Captain Janeway. He stood immediately, though Admiral Necheyev remained in her seat. “Captain.”_

“Good morning, Commander. Admiral.” Turning back to him, she asked, “Can I hope that you have news?”

“One may always hope,” he said, choosing to take her question literally. A slight movement of her lips was her only reaction as they sat together in front of the Admiral’s desk.

“Good morning, Captain,” said Necheyev briefly. “To open the meet-
ing, I can dispense with the progress on my end in one sentence: Wiler isn’t talking.”

“No surprise there,” said Janeway. “Too bad he’s not a telepath; it would be a lot simpler.”

Tuvok concurred. Federation law prohibited the use of telepathic monitoring of any legal detainee unless the suspect was a member of a telepathic race. He recognized the fairness and necessity of such a law, but it certainly did make some things more difficult.

“It would also be simpler if we weren’t constrained by the law while people like Wiler and his employers are free to break it,” said Necheyev. “Sometimes it really does feel as if we’re trying to win a race with an impulse engine while everyone else has a warp drive. Commander, please tell me that you have more to share than I do.”

“My search of the Hamilton Foundation records has revealed a discrepancy in the reporting on the slipstream drive research,” he said. “But it was not the discrepancy I had expected. I was looking for differences between the original report and the one received by Voyager via the MIDAS array. There were none, not even at the data block level. What I found instead was that the final report delivered to the Foundation, straight from the principal investigator, withheld a vital fact that had previously been included in the abstract submitted for the 2377 Foundation conference. The abstract specifically mentioned the phase variance.”

The women looked at him with matching expressions of astonishment.

“So there never was a mousetrap,” said Janeway.

“Not in the sense that we were expecting it, no. But I strongly believe that the deletion of that information was, in itself, the mousetrap.”

“Unbelievable,” said Necheyev. “We’ve been looking at this from the wrong direction all this time, thinking someone added something to the report when they actually took it out. So our saboteur hijacked the report between its source and the Foundation and removed a small but vital piece of data. Ingenious.”

Tuvok shook his head. “It seems more likely that the information was removed before it ever left the source. Dr. Necheyev attended the conference presentation given by Dr. Trallek, and she assures me that he never mentioned the phase variance.”

“If Alison gave you that assurance, you can take it as fact,” said Necheyev firmly. “I believe a talk with Dr. Trallek is in order.”
“Precisely my thought as well. And I do not think it should be done over a video link.”

“I agree. He’s clearly involved somehow. I don’t want him disappearing before we can get some answers.”

Which was de facto permission for him to continue on his course of action. Satisfied with his foresight, he said, “The Kensington is leaving orbit in one hour and passing very near Ipsen Prime. I have already arranged passage.”

She pursed her lips. “We can do better than that, Commander. We have a new Saber class vessel at Earth Station McKinley that’s scheduled for a test run today. The run will be pushing the engine to its full capacity of warp nine point eight five.”

“Nine eight five!” Janeway appeared momentarily embarrassed by her outburst, but then continued, “How did we squeeze another point one five out of an engine that small? As of the records Starfleet sent me last year, the Saber class was still limited to nine point seven.”

Tuvok raised an eyebrow at the interruption. The Captain’s enthusiasm for engineering never seemed far beneath the surface, no matter what else was occurring. But he did not think that Admiral Necheyev would welcome this diversion from the topic.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” said Necheyev, instantly countering his expectations. “Things have changed in Ship Design, Captain. It’s one of the few branches of Starfleet that actually benefitted from the Dominion War. It’s attracting some of the best minds in the Federation, and recruiting has seen a steep increase. Now we have officers and cadets competing to get in, even those on a command track.”

“Really?” Janeway was intrigued. “There are command track opportunities in Ship Design now?”

“Not per se. But the posts have become so prestigious, and the work so rewarding thanks to the current levels of funding and recognition, that officers are willing to step off the track for a year or two simply for the opportunity to work there.”

“Well, I can certainly understand that. Few things lifted our morale in the Delta Quadrant quite so high as when we designed the Delta Flyer and the slipstream drive. Before we discovered the mousetrap, that is,” Janeway added. “But there’s nothing quite like producing a physical, tangible result from one’s efforts.”
“Indeed.” Necheyev studied her for a moment. “Would you like to see the design specs for the new ship?”

Janeway gave her a startled smile. “I would.”

“I’ll arrange it.” Turning back to Tuvok—who had watched this irrelevant exchange with some bemusement—Necheyev added, “As of now I’m changing the orders for the Tagus’s flight. It will be carrying you straight to Ipsen Prime and back. At warp nine point eight five, the round trip should take about fifty hours, including rest periods for the warp drive. Departure time was scheduled for thirteen hundred hours, but if they’re ready to go any earlier, you’re authorized to initiate launch.” She pulled out a PADD, tapped her orders into it, and handed it across the desk. “I don’t want to wait two days, Commander. I’m not enjoying having to put a security detail on Captain Janeway any more than she is.”

“Understood,” he said, accepting the PADD. “I expect to have answers soon after arrival, and will communicate them immediately. I’ll leave Lieutenant Terrill here to coordinate in my absence. She has proven helpful so far.” He saw Janeway turn to look at him, but kept his eyes on Necheyev.

“Very well,” she said. “Dismissed, and good luck.”

Wisely, he refrained from pointing out that luck had no relevance in his work.

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As the door closed behind Tuvok, Necheyev focused her gaze on Kathryn. “Your faith in him is well justified.”

“It’s also well earned. Tuvok and I have a long history.”

“It occurs to me that perhaps I misinterpreted your statement the day before yesterday, when you said you felt more confident with him on the case,” Necheyev continued. “You meant that at face value, didn’t you?”

With some effort, Kathryn kept her jaw shut. This was probably as close to an apology as she would ever hear from Necheyev. It was also unprecedented. “Yes, I did,” she said carefully. “Though I’m certain there are highly qualified people here, and look forward to getting to know them, the fact remains that I trust Tuvok more than any other investigator.”

“You spent seven years with no support other than your crew. It’s only natural that you would form an extremely high level of trust with them,
and they with you.” Necheyev leaned back in her chair, tapping her fingers on the arms. “Have you thought about what comes next?”

“Could you be more specific?”

The chair came forward again as Necheyev rested her elbows on the desk. "Once we finish with the debriefings and the publicity tour, you’ve got six months of leave coming. So does most of your crew, or at least the ones who are staying in Starfleet. But Starfleet itself isn’t coming to a halt in that time. Half the captains in the fleet are already putting out feelers about your personnel, and they’re wise to do so. Your crew represents a significant injection of experience and skill into the pool.” She paused, a small smile playing about her lips. “You’ve an admirable poker face, Captain, but not when it comes to anger. That shows right here.” She pointed toward her own eyes.

Caught, Kathryn swallowed down the instant ire she’d felt at the idea of her crew being poached. “My crew will make their own decisions about their futures. I’m only glad that their service has made them so desirable. Being able to write their own tickets is at least some compensation for the dues they’ve paid.”

“But it’s not compensation for your dues, is it? Losing all the people you trust?”

Kathryn said nothing, wondering where Necheyev was going with this. She didn’t have to wait long.

“Do you want to go back out again, Captain?”

“I…” Kathryn stopped, startled to find she didn’t have an instant answer. “I do. But not right away. I’m ready to keep my feet on the ground for a while—and these days I have more to consider than just myself. Lynne is just now finding a home. I don’t want to take her away from it.” Not the most politically astute answer, but it was the truth.

And Necheyev seemed to expect precisely that. “It’s not common for a flag officer candidate to have a spouse with an even more powerful position,” she said.

Flag officer? Kathryn was derailed by the comment and missed Necheyev’s next few words.

“…importance to Starfleet and its goals. You’re an unusual case all by yourself, Captain, and Ms. Hamilton adds yet another interesting angle to the mix. There’s been considerable discussion as to how best to utilize the two of you.”
“With respect, Admiral, Lynne is not part of the equation as far as Starfleet is concerned. She’s not available for ‘utilization’.”

“She hasn’t resigned her contract.” Necheyev raised a knowing eyebrow. “And she won’t, either, until she knows where you’re going.”

After rejecting her first response as one that might get her in serious trouble, Kathryn said, “I’ve learned the hard way never to make assumptions about what Lynne will or won’t do.”

“Did you assume she’d get a court-martial recommendation removed from your record?”

That caught her flat footed. Lynne hadn’t said anything of the sort last night. “Excuse me?”

“I guess she did that on her own, then,” said Necheyev, apparently taking her confirmation from Kathryn’s surprise. “I know Ms. Hamilton had an appointment with the President yesterday. And oddly enough, yesterday afternoon I was informed by Data Records that they received a communiqué from the Office of the President, reversing its prior recommendation for court-martial. Of course, it was a moot point since that battle has already been fought, and Gutierrez was never going to get that court-martial convened. Nevertheless, purging your record of his request makes a big difference to your career potential. There’s nothing between you and a flag position now except your desires and the belief of a promotional board in your abilities. Which is why I’m asking you if you want to go back out. If you want your own ship again, you may have to make a decision in the next few months.”

If she thought she’d been caught out before, it was nothing compared to how she felt now. “Are…are you recommending me for a promotion?” she asked faintly.

“Not just yet. You’re not ready, and neither are we. You still don’t realize that you’re no longer operating in a vacuum, and we haven’t yet determined where you could do the most good. But as of yesterday the possibility became far more concrete. And I suddenly have a much better idea of where to apply your skills.” She sat back, pulled open her desk drawer, and removed a PADD. With a few swift keystrokes she downloaded several files from her terminal and handed the PADD across the desk. “Here are the specs for the Tagus. I’ll be interested in your thoughts. By the way, Chekrine has indicated his desire for a post at the Academy.
Seems he’s missing his teaching days and wants to get back into the classroom before he retires.”

Kathryn looked from the PADD to Necheyev, her mind whirling. Rear Admiral Chekrine was the Chief of Ship Design. Not a post with great political power, but an extremely prestigious one—and one that gave its holder nearly free rein to direct the future of the fleet itself. All twelve Federation shipyards existed to build the designs that came out of that facility. It was an engineer’s dream job.

And apparently it was soon to be vacated.

“Your team built a slipstream drive while Ship Design was still stuck on a few issues they found insurmountable,” said Necheyev. “And then you found the phase variance. In addition, you’ve made structural changes to your ship that have our engineers scratching their heads. You and your staff put Ship Design to shame. It would not be a hard sell to put you up as a viable candidate to replace Chekrine—if you wanted the position, that is, and if you manage to convince me that you can merge yourself back into the command structure.” She tilted her head. “Have I actually struck you speechless, Captain?”

“Yes.” It was all she could come up with.

Necheyev laughed, startling her even more. “Good. I’ll mark this day on my calendar. No need for decisions this very moment; I’m just thinking ahead to the possibilities. Take a look at those specs and be prepared to give me your preliminary evaluation in two days.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Kathryn was starting to recover, and already itching to bury herself in the Saber files. “But I should point out that the accomplishments you speak of weren’t mine alone. Lieutenants Torres, Paris and Kim, Commander Tuvok and Seven of Nine were invaluable to that effort.”

“Of course they were. Do you think Chekrine is personally responsible for new designs? Ship Design is a team, not a single person. And it would be quite a coup if you could bring your team with you, wouldn’t it? Might even sway a promotion board.”

Kathryn could only nod. Necheyev was at least three light years ahead of her in this conversation, and she just wasn’t going to catch up.

“Now,” continued Necheyev briskly, “speaking of you and the command structure, let’s talk about your performance in the studio yesterday. You might recall it—the one where you went against all the
recommendations of Communications and not only mentioned your personnel losses, but made them a highlight of the interview?"

For this topic, at least, Kathryn had come prepared. “I kept the recommendations of Communications very much in mind, but in my opinion it would have reflected badly on Starfleet had I sidestepped a direct question not just about my losses, but about a specific individual. It’s one thing to express regret about an abstract concept and then redirect the interview, and something else entirely to try that when the topic has a face and a name. That had to be addressed head on. And I did so in a manner that I felt best represented Starfleet to the people who were watching that interview and waiting for some acknowledgement of Ms. Martin and her son.”

Necheyev regarded her steadily. “In other words, you took your orders under advisement and made your own decision.”

“I was never ordered not to speak of my lost crew members. It was a recommendation only.”

“And if it had been an order?”

“That’s a moot question, Admiral. It wasn’t. Which means you didn’t feel strongly enough about the impact of such a referral to directly instruct me one way or the other. Which means that I had latitude to decide the best course of action in a situation that varied from the scenarios anticipated by Starfleet Communications.”

“Excellent defense, Captain,” said Necheyev after a moment. “While your maverick tendencies can be a thorn in my side, I have to admit that they also work to our advantage at times. In this case they did. Public response was overwhelmingly positive, which means you saved Starfleet from a potential black eye. But now you get to pay the consequences.”

“I’m prepared to do so.” Though she had no idea what they might be.

“Good.” Necheyev glanced at the time display on her wall monitor. “Your first opportunity will be in one hour. Ms. Martin contacted us yesterday—she’s coming here to speak to you about her son. We scheduled her this morning, before your appearance in Geneva.”

Kathryn sat back in her chair, her heart sinking inside her chest. “Oh, god.”

For the first time, Necheyev actually seemed sympathetic. “You made a very broad offer, Captain. I think it came from the right place, and in purely detached, public relations terms, I think it will be good for Starfleet’s image. But you’ve also put yourself into a difficult position. You
lost twenty-three members of your crew. That’s a lot of tough conversations, should each of their families take you up on your offer. There’s a good reason why family notifications are conducted by trained Starfleet counselors.”

“I know.” She shook her head. “And if you had any idea how many times I wished I’d had a ship’s counselor…”

“I can guess,” said Necheyev. “And I’ll provide you with one to help you through this. But the fact remains that you made an offer on a Federation-wide broadcast, and now you’ll have to live with it.”

Kathryn straightened, stung by the words. “I already live with the knowledge that I lost twenty-three good people, Admiral. I’ve lived with that for years. And I meant precisely what I said yesterday. If those families want to talk to me, I can’t do anything less than be available for them. They deserve that and so much more.”

“That’s what I thought you’d say. And it does you credit. But I don’t want you doing this on your own.” She looked up and spoke to the comm system. “Necheyev to Sosallme.”

“Yes, Admiral,” came the sweet tones of Necheyev’s Andorian aide.

“Yes, she’s waiting for you now.”

“Please bring her in.”

The door opened immediately, and a familiar figure walked through, wearing the dress uniform of a commander. “Good morning, Admiral… Captain,” she said with a smile.

Kathryn stood up and extended a hand. “Counselor Troi, it’s good to see you again. So you’re my guide through the tough conversations?”

“I am.” Troi shook her hand. “And for the record, I think your response in yesterday’s interview was spectacular.”

“Thank you. I’m grateful to have your assistance in helping me keep my word.”

“I’ve reserved the solarium for your meeting,” said Necheyev. “And for the previous hour as well. If you’d like to escort Counselor Troi there, you can utilize the time to prepare for your conversation with Ms. Martin.”

Knowing a dismissal when she heard one, Kathryn nodded and turned to her new associate. “Shall we?”

“Of course. It’s good to see you again, Alynna,” said Troi.
“And you, Deanna. Thank you for making yourself available on such short notice.”

“Any time.”

_Alynna?_ thought Kathryn. _They’re on a first name basis?_

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**Gretchen was** in the middle of breaking eggs into her mixing bowl when the door chime rang. “Lynne?” she called. “Can you get that?”

“Sure thing,” came the reply from the living room.

She heard voices at the door and a low laugh from Lynne, which raised her curiosity to a sufficient level that she set aside her bowl and washed her hands. Just as she tossed the towel onto the counter, Lynne poked her head around the corner.

“Got something for you. Security picked it up from a delivery person.”

“What’s that?”

The rest of Lynne’s body came into view, holding a large bouquet of lilies in a decorative vase. “Something I didn’t know you still did in this century. It’s good to know that one-eight-hundred-flowers never went out of business.”

“Where did these come from?” asked Gretchen in confusion. “And what the hell is one-eight-hundred-flowers?”

“Toll free phone number to order flowers from anywhere in the country,” Lynne explained, not helping at all. “As for where they’re from—guess you’d better check the card.” She put the flowers on the kitchen table and pulled a small envelope from their midst.

Gretchen took it automatically. It had her name written on the outside, but she didn’t recognize the handwriting. Which meant that they had indeed been ordered, as Lynne had said. But what was a toll free number?

She forgot the question as she pulled the card from its envelope.

_For all the times I never said it—thank you._

_“They’re from Kathryn,”_ she said, looking at the signature. _“Real_
flowers? These must have cost her a fortune. Why didn’t she just replicate them?”

“Probably because replicated flowers don’t have the same scent, or so I’ve been told.” Lynne buried her nose in the lilies. “Ohhhh. Well, it’s true. These smell fantastic.”

Gretchen bent over and followed her example, closing her eyes as the bold scent hit her nostrils. “Oh my. That smells like summer. I have these in my front flower bed. What a treat to smell them in February!” She straightened and looked at the card again, a tingle of joy curling around her insides.

“What does it say? If I can ask, that is.”

In answer, Gretchen showed her the card. She couldn’t have stopped smiling if she’d wanted to, and when Lynne looked up it got even worse. She felt ridiculously gratified.

“I think I’m jealous,” said Lynne, handing it back. “But since you’re her mother, I guess I’ll overlook it.”

Gretchen carefully replaced the card in its little holder amongst the flowers. “She’s never done this before.”

“Really?”

“Really. It’s not her style.”

“You’re kidding. Well, I guess it’s just a good habit she picked up in the Delta Quadrant.”

Gretchen studied her for a moment, noting the ill-suppressed grin. “She picked it up from you, didn’t she?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so, but maybe. At any rate, that woman does have class. And that, she learned from you.” Lynne leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. “Thank you from me as well.”

“For what?” Not that she was complaining.

“For being a great mom.” Lynne gave her a meaningful look. “Revi told Kathryn about yesterday. I guess it made her realize how lucky she is to have you. I of course knew that from the first letter you ever sent me.”

Gretchen’s joyous tingle faded a bit. “Well, I’m delighted that she feels that way, but I wish it had come about differently. Poor Revi.”

“I know. But you know what? The fact that Revi is even addressing this says a lot about how far she’s come. A few months ago she’d never have had the resources to handle it. So don’t feel sorry for her, Gretchen. Just cheer her on.”
“Oh, I am.” She leaned over to sniff her flowers again. “My god. Kathryn sent me flowers. Well, I guess she’s saying the same thing I am with my brownies, just in a different way.”

“Brownies? You’re making brownies?” Lynne went straight to the mixing bowl. “When were you going to tell me this?”

“When I brought you the bowl to lick,” said Gretchen, and laughed at her expression. “You look about thirteen years old right now.”

“Four hundred and thirteen would be closer.” Leaning against the counter, she added, “I’ll just stay here. It’ll save you time when you’re done.”

Shaking her head, Gretchen picked up her spatula and began beating in the eggs. Unable to help herself, she glanced back at the table, where her bouquet took up nearly half the space with its bulk.

*Kathryn sent me flowers.*

She set the mixing bowl back down and reached for the vanilla extract, still marveling. *Not only that, but she said thank you.*

It felt amazingly good. Really, there was only one other thing that could mean more, but that involved a word that no one in their family had ever made a habit of using. It just wasn’t something they said.

But then she remembered Revi last night, sitting at that very table, saying she’d just found out that her father loved her—and she didn’t care. What a terrible, terrible thing.

*Maybe it’s time someone in this family started a new habit.*

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**Kathryn stood beside Troi,** surrounded by the verdant greenery of the solarium and nervously tugging her sleeve into place. She had changed into a dress uniform, which served to emphasize the gravity of this meeting. In her career she’d recorded far too many messages to families of lost crew members, but never had she spoken with any of them face to face. It wasn’t a responsibility expected of captains, for good reason. But Necheyev was right: she’d made the offer, and now she had to live with it.

At least she had Troi, who had given her some excellent advice, and in the time they’d had left she’d managed to act on it. Hopefully Ms. Martin would find some measure of comfort in what she had to offer.
Through the transparent doors she saw a young ensign approaching, with Susanna Martin at his side. She looked quite different from the day before, in her dark formal suit, polished shoes and a hairstyle that had clearly taken some time.

“This is a good sign,” said Troi in a low voice. “If she was looking at this simply as a means of venting her anger and grief onto you, she wouldn’t have taken such care with her appearance. She certainly didn’t during the parade.”

Kathryn wasn’t sure whether to believe that or not, but she had no more time to think about it as the doors opened and Ms. Martin walked through.

“Ms. Martin,” she said, stepping forward with her hand outstretched. “Thank you so much for coming.”

“Thank you for your offer,” said Martin shyly. “It wasn’t what I expected.”

“This is Counselor Troi.” Kathryn indicated her companion. “She’s here to help both of us.”

*Make her understand she’s not the only one unsure of herself in this meeting,* Troi had said, and by the expression on Martin’s face as they shook hands, it had been good advice. She already seemed slightly more at ease.

“It’s good to meet you, Ms. Martin.” Troi’s voice was warm and caring. “Though I certainly wish it were under different circumstances.”

“Thank you.” She looked around, clutching her purse with both hands. “This is a nice place. I never knew there was a garden inside Starfleet Headquarters.”

“It was designed over fifty years ago, when Starfleet was first considering airponics bays in long-range ships,” said Kathryn, indicating the path with an outstretched arm. “But since then it’s grown into something quite different. There’s a bench by the fountain in the center; shall we?”

“I thought I heard water.” Martin took the cue and walked beside her, while Troi brought up the rear. “It’s not as big as it looks, is it?”

“No. I think that’s part of the appeal.” Kathryn turned left at a fork in the path, and within a few steps emerged into a circular open space, walled on all sides by trees, vines and tiered plantings. In the center, bracketed by three benches, was a small fountain splashing softly over natural rocks. The effect was one of privacy and serenity.
She sat toward the end of one bench and indicated the place next to her. “Won’t you sit down?”

Somewhat stiffly, Martin took her place, though she still clutched her purse. Troi sat on her other side, immediately leaning back and providing a picture of relaxed body posture as she gazed at the fountain. “I’ve always loved this spot,” she said. “I come here to think sometimes, when things get a little too difficult to handle.”

Martin said nothing, but her grip on her purse seemed to relax slightly as she followed Troi’s gaze.

“I don’t really know how to start,” said Kathryn, when it became obvious that Martin was not going to speak. “You must have so many questions. But maybe I can start by answering the one you’ve already asked me.”

Martin swung her head around, frowning in confusion. “I haven’t asked you anything.”

“You asked me, ‘what about the ones I left behind,’” Kathryn reminded her gently. Martin immediately dropped her eyes, but raised them again as Kathryn continued, “I left no one behind, Ms. Martin. Because that would imply that I forgot about them, or stopped caring, or dismissed them from my mind. I didn’t. There is no way I can forget any of the people who didn’t come home. And certainly not Joe.”

*Use his name*, Troi had advised. *Not his formal name, not his rank, but the name he went by. Show her that you really did know him.*

“I’m...I’m sorry about the sign,” said Martin. “I’ve just been so angry. A whole ticker tape parade for you, and nothing for Joe, not even any mention of him in all that news coverage. It was like he just disappeared. Like nobody cared. I wanted people to care.”

“I’m sorry that you ever felt we didn’t care.”

“I’ve felt that way for three and a half years, Captain. Three and a half years since those Starfleet officers showed up on my doorstep and said *Voyager* had made contact, but my son was already dead. And then they left, and that was it.”

“But that wasn’t it for you,” said Troi. “You’ve had to live with the loss ever since. And now Joe’s crewmates have come home, and it feels different, doesn’t it?”

“It’s so much worse. Everyone else is so happy.” Meeting Kathryn’s eyes again, she said, “I read about your parade and it felt like somebody
slapped me. I didn’t even know about your offer until my friend called me to ask if I was going to accept...because I couldn’t bring myself to watch you on FedComm. I didn’t want to see your face.”

It hurt, but Kathryn kept her expression neutral. “I can understand why,” she said.

“I watched it after Caren called. That was a...a nice thing you did, reading off all their names. And I didn’t know about your father and your fiancé. I’m sorry for your loss, too.”

Kathryn’s heart went out to the mother who could, even in the depths of her own grief, reach out to her. “Thank you. But I didn’t read their names. I had no written list. They’re all in here.” She laid her hand over her heart. “I meant it when I said I can’t forget them.”

Martin studied her for several seconds, finally nodding slightly. “I believe you. Thank you for that; it makes me feel a little bit better.” She turned back to the fountain, watching it in apparent fascination and saying nothing else. Kathryn was just about to break the silence when a gesture from Troi caught her eye. Discreetly, Troi was giving her a hand signal that clearly said Don’t.

She sat back and waited, wondering what Troi had sensed. And then she saw Martin’s face tightening, a body language cue that she easily recognized from years at the negotiation table.

Straightening her spine, Martin faced her fully and said in a determined voice, “I do have a question for you. I need you to tell me what nobody else will. They just said he died in the course of his duty, that he was shot and couldn’t be saved. Your letter said the same thing. But I don’t know what that means. What exactly was he doing? Was it quick? Did he suffer?” Her voice caught, but she continued bravely, “They seem to think that I don’t have the right to know how my son died, just because he died in Starfleet. But I do. I’m his mother. I have the right.”

“Yes, you do,” said Troi, leaning forward. “You absolutely do. Starfleet has a policy of not providing details of death, and there are some good reasons for that policy, but you deserve the truth. I think you’re very courageous to ask.”

“It’s not courage.” A flush suffused Martin’s face, and her eyes were suspiciously shiny. “It’s a need. I have to know. I have to know how my baby died.”

Kathryn had expected it, she understood it, and she’d have asked the
same thing herself if she’d been in Martin’s place. But to sit here and give
details of a totally senseless death to a grieving mother…

“It was very quick,” she said as gently as she could. “He didn’t suffer
at all. He was shot with a Starfleet phaser on a kill setting, which means—
please forgive me for stating it so bluntly—but his body was vaporized
instantly. He never knew what happened.”

The tears spilled over. “Oh, thank god. Thank god.” She dabbed at her
eyes, then suddenly pierced Kathryn with a glare. “Are you sure? This isn’t
some line to make me feel better? How do you know?”

“I’m sure. I was there, Ms. Martin. I saw the whole thing.”

Her eyes went wide. “You were there? What happened?”

Taking a deep breath, Kathryn told her about the distress call they’d
answered, and how they’d beamed three survivors aboard, one of whom
had died within minutes. Except he hadn’t died, not really, because he had
transferred his consciousness to Kes, a member of her crew who was
assisting the Doctor. The consciousness turned out to be that of a two
hundred-year-old warlord named Tieran, who had merely been occupying
the body of the man who’d died in Sickbay. And now he had taken over
the body and mind of Kes.

“But no one knew it,” she said. “We didn’t have a clue. And Kes was
one of my most trusted people. When we arrived at the homeworld of the
two survivors, a representative was sent up to meet us. So I had the two
survivors brought to the transporter room, and Kes—or who I thought
was Kes— came in both a medical and ambassadorial capacity. Joe was the
transporter operator.”

Martin’s mouth made a silent ‘O’ as she listened.

“He beamed up the representative. Kes and I were standing side by
side, facing the transporter platform. As the man materialized on the plat-
form, I stepped forward to greet him—and Kes pulled a phaser and shot
him. Then she turned around and shot Joe. It happened in less than two
seconds. I’m so sorry, but I never had a chance to stop her.”

“Just like that? She shot Joe just like that? But why?”

“It wasn’t Kes,” said Kathryn. “It was the warlord using her body. And
he didn’t see Joe or me or that representative as anything but obstacles to
his plan. Joe wasn’t armed, I wasn’t armed—there was no reason to expect
any problems. And never in a thousand years would I have suspected Kes
of bringing a phaser to the transporter room with intent to kill. She revered life. Joe thought she was his friend. So did I.”

“Did she…I mean, did he shoot you, too?”

She almost wished she could say yes. How bad would it look that she’d stood by while two people died, and then managed to save herself?

“No. I was trying to reach him while he was aiming at Joe. But I was too late. I fought him for the phaser, but it turned out that the two survivors in the room were working with him. One of them knocked me unconscious, and all three of them beamed off the ship. I woke up in sickbay.”

“So you and Joe were surrounded by enemies without knowing it.”

Kathryn blinked. “Yes. I hadn’t actually thought about it that way, but...yes, we were.”

“And one minute he was operating the transporter, and the next he was dead.”

“I’m afraid so. I wish I could tell you differently, but it was just senseless.”

She nodded slowly. “But he died on his ship, doing his job. And I know he loved what he did. At least it wasn’t in some sort of battle, with him being frightened or hurt. And it was fast. He didn’t suffer. You know, you take any tiny bit of hope that you can.” She wiped her eyes and stared at the fountain. “What happened then? I mean, what happened to Kes?”

For a moment Kathryn was surprised—why would Martin care about Kes?—but then she understood.

“She was still there, in her mind, fighting Tieran. Once we figured out exactly what had happened, we went after her with a device to pull Tieran’s consciousness out. I almost lost my Chief of Security on that mission—we tried infiltration first, but Tieran caught him because he had Kes’ telepathic abilities. Then we went in with a full invasion force. We found Kes, but by then Tieran had already transferred to yet another body. Fortunately, Kes knew him well enough by then to recognize him no matter which body he was in. She took the device and put it on the new host, and Tieran was destroyed. Your son’s killer was brought to justice. He wasn’t just contained. His consciousness was utterly eradicated.”

“Good,” she whispered. “I hope he screamed when he realized he was dying.”

“He panicked,” Kathryn answered softly. “He was terrified. The irony
is that he killed Joe and took over Kes because he wanted power and immortality. But because of his actions, we went after him. If he’d left us alone, he’d have gotten what he wanted. Instead he lost everything.”

Martin’s hands clenched and unclenched on her purse, two, three times—and then she turned her head and looked at Kathryn with a fierce-ness that belied her dress and previous manner. “Thank you. You have no idea how much it helps to know that.”

Reaching out, Kathryn covered one of her hands. “I do know.”

The fierce look faded. “I guess maybe you do.”

After a moment, Troi said, “Ms. Martin, we both understand why you would want to know the details of Joe’s death. But we also thought you might want to know a little bit more about his life on Voyager.”

Kathryn released her hand and pulled out the PADD she’d carried in with her. “I went into Voyager’s database and downloaded some images of Joe. I know you’ve received his effects by now, but those don’t tell the whole story.”

Martin accepted it wonderingly, her eyes riveted to the image on the screen. “Oh…where is this? He looks so happy.”

“It’s a holodeck program that we ran continuously during our first year in the Delta Quadrant. It’s modeled on a tavern in Marseilles called Sandrine’s. At one time or another, almost all of our crew went there to relax.”

“He would have loved that.” Her sudden smile was brilliant. “He studied in Paris for a term during his junior year at the Academy. And I know he went to Marseilles at least once. I wonder if he actually knew this tavern?”

“Well, he definitely felt quite at home there.” In fact, Joe Martin’s expression in the image was one of ease and enjoyment. He had been photographed while talking and laughing with another crewman as both sat at a table laden with two full glasses and several empty ones.

“Somehow I never thought of him laughing when the ship was lost.” Martin stared hungrily at the image for long moments, then advanced to the next one. “And where is this?”

“That’s our mess hall. We were celebrating one of Neelix’s imaginary holidays.” At her bewildered look, Kathryn hastened to explain. “Neelix joined us in the Delta Quadrant and became our morale officer. He was always inventing reasons to have a party.”
“Just look at him. I think that’s the ugliest shirt I’ve ever seen him wear.”

Kathryn looked more closely at the image. “Oh, that’s right. We were celebrating some strange Talaxian holiday that required everyone to wear orange. Not his color, is it?”

Martin let out a bark of laughter that was just this side of a sob. “Not in a million years.”

They spent another twenty minutes going over the images Kathryn and Troi had selected, nearly all of them showing Joe relaxing. Their efforts clearly had the desired effect as Ms. Martin grew more and more at ease, her emotional fragility bolstered by a new understanding that her son had not spent three and a half years lost, afraid and alone. The images made it clear that he’d had friends, had enjoyed his time off, and had created a life for himself despite being stranded seventy thousand light years from home. And when they came to the last one, Martin deactivated the PADD and clutched it to her chest. “I hope you don’t want this back, because I am never letting go of it.”

Kathryn smiled. “It’s yours.”

“Good.” She opened her purse and carefully slipped the PADD inside, then gave them a watery smile. “Thank you so much for this. It’s so much more than I expected.”

“You’re welcome,” said Kathryn. “Thank you for coming. I’m very glad I had the chance to talk to you.”

Troi stepped in smoothly, rising from the bench and somehow getting the group back to the entrance without allowing the moment to grow overly awkward. The aide was already waiting on the other side of the transparent doors, and after handshakes and goodbyes all around, Ms. Martin left with a posture considerably more assured than it had been when she entered. Just in front of the door sensor she hesitated, shook her head, and turned around. With a purposeful step, she walked straight up to a startled Kathryn and pulled her into an embrace.

“You gave my son back to me,” she whispered. “I can never thank you enough. God bless you and keep you safe.”

Giving her a final squeeze, she turned and walked out. As the doors shut behind her, Kathryn and Troi were left alone in the greenery, watching the aide escort her down the hall.

For a minute neither of them moved, and there was no sound but the
soft splash of the fountain. Then Troi put a light hand on Kathryn’s shoulder.

“That felt a bit like redemption, didn’t it?”

Kathryn was forever grateful for her sensitivity, as the counselor walked away without turning to see her tears.
“Hello, I’m sorry,” said Counselor Troi as she entered the room. “I had an unexpected appointment over at the Admin building. I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

“Just five minutes,” said Revi.

Seven frowned, wondering why Revi didn’t tell the truth. They’d arrived six minutes early, therefore they had been waiting eleven minutes, not five.

: Because there is such a thing as too much accuracy, darling. :

“Good. I do apologize.” Troi went to the replicator in the corner and ordered a glass of water. “Can I get either of you anything?”

“How about a double vodka, straight up?” asked Revi. Seven raised an eyebrow, but Troi seemed unaffected.

“I get that request more often than you’d think,” she remarked. “But I find that alcohol tends to interfere with my clients’ ability to focus.”

: Perfect. That’s what I want. :

“Now, that might actually be your goal,” Troi continued, causing Seven to hide her smile, “but it’s certainly not mine and it would be a waste of our time. So, water? Juice? I can make a very good hot chocolate—my own program.”

“I would like to try that,” said Seven. If it was a special program, the probability was high that it was a better than average drink.
“Fine,” said Revi. “I’ll have it too.”

“Coming right up. Please, have a seat.”

Seven gave some thought to choosing a different chair than their first time, just to see what Troi would say about it, but Revi rolled her eyes and sat pointedly on the sofa.

Troi walked over soon after, setting two steaming mugs of hot chocolate on the coffee table and making herself comfortable in the same seat she’d used before. Taking a sip of her water, she looked at them quizically. “Something has changed,” she said. “Quite a lot. I’m sensing very different feelings today than I did last week.”

“It’s been a busy week,” said Revi.

Now Seven rolled her eyes. “What Revi means to say, in her inefficient way, is that she met her mother yesterday.” She intentionally left the most salient fact for Revi to relate.

: Thanks for moving us right along, : came the acerbic thought. : I was going to ease into it. :

: We only have an hour, not a day. : That earned her a quick glare, but there was no real heat in it. Seven knew that sometimes Revi needed her to take the lead, even if she grumbled about it. For the last twenty-four hours, that need had been greater than normal.

“You did! Then she kept her word.”

“Yes,” Revi conceded. “But now I wish she hadn’t.”

“Oh dear. Well, take a couple of sips of that hot chocolate, and when you’re ready to talk about what happened, I’m listening.” Troi lifted her water glass, seeming to be in no hurry.

Revi wasn’t in any hurry either, but after some encouragement from Seven—both mental and verbal—she told the story to a sympathetic Troi. In the process of describing the images being shared, both by her and Dhara, the emotions she’d managed to tamp down came surging back up again. “I don’t know where to go from here,” she finished, reaching out at last for her neglected cup of hot chocolate. “I’m not sure I ever want to deal with this again. But I started it, and now I don’t think my mother will let it drop.” She made a face. “This is already cold.”

Troi stood and reached for the cup. “It’s not ‘already’ cold, Revi. We’ve been talking for twenty minutes.”

“We have?” Revi checked her internal chronometer. “Gods, we have. I don’t usually lose track of time like that.” She looked at Seven in dismay.
At the replicator, Troi recycled the hot chocolate and ordered a new one. “It’s not uncommon when emotions are heightened.”

“It is for me. I have a built-in chronometer. So does Seven. We don’t forget the time.”

“Sometimes we do,” said Seven, sending a decidedly different, intimate set of images to Revi. The resulting smile was a balm to her soul, which had been hurting as she’d watched her partner struggle through the retelling.

Returning with a steaming mug, Troi put it on the table in front of Revi and said, “I know that your Borg systems are a big part of you, but right now you’re a lot more Human than you are Borg.”

“Thank you.” Revi picked up the mug and sipped it appreciatively. “I mean for the hot chocolate. I’m not sure about the Borg bit—right now I could use a little more emotional detachment.”

“Oh, I disagree completely. Detaching would set you back. Think of this situation as a river, shallow at the edges and deep in the center. You really need to get to the other side, but it means wading into the deep water and swimming. You’ve been in the shallows for a long time, Revi. And you just took a huge leap of courage and faith, and jumped in the deep part. Don’t go back now. If you do, you’ll just have to go through this all over again, sometime later. And probably not at a time of your choosing.”

“What makes you think this was a time of my choosing?”

“Because you’re the one who made the offer to your mother, not the other way around.”

Revi stopped in mid-sip, the shock of that zinging down their link and right through Seven’s spine. “But I didn’t mean…” She trailed off, looking at Troi with wide eyes. “It wasn’t intentional.”

“You invited your mother to share your mind and your emotions—a greater intimacy and vulnerability than non-telepaths can even imagine—and it wasn’t intentional?”

Seven gripped Revi’s free hand, wishing she could soothe away the confusion. It hurt to see her losing confidence again. Perhaps these sessions weren’t so beneficial after all.

The thought brought a tiny spark of dark amusement into Revi’s emotions. : Always ready to defend me…unfortunately, this is how counseling works. I’m not liking it, but I have to do it. :
But it’s making you worse. Seven was giving thought to ending the session.

“Excuse me.” Troi’s voice was calm but firm. “I watched you two do this last week, but at that time it wasn’t interfering with our progress, so I didn’t say anything. Now it’s interfering. Revi, I need to know what you’re thinking. I need you to do it out loud.”

Revi turned immediately, chastened. “I’m sorry. We sometimes forget that others can see when we're communicating.”

“I think most of the time, uninterested observers wouldn’t pick it up. But I’m very interested.”

“I apologize as well,” said Seven, not wanting Revi to take the brunt of their correction. “However, I question the efficacy of your methods. Revi is significantly more upset and confused now than when we arrived. How exactly is this helping her?”

Troi didn’t seem fazed in the slightest. “Facing your emotions and their underlying causes is never easy. Tell me, Seven, can you repair a malfunctioning phase coil without touching it? Without taking off the external housing and getting into the complex pieces and parts that make it work?”

“You are implying that Revi’s emotions are analogous to a mechanical object. I don’t believe that’s accurate.”

“Try not to be quite so literal,” said Revi unexpectedly. “She’s right. I’m tired of being broken, Seven. If Counselor Troi can repair my phase coil, then I’m willing to do my part.”

“Revi is fortunate to have you,” said Troi. “She couldn’t ask for a more caring partner. But it’s possible to protect someone too much. I know you want to keep her safe and protect her from being hurt. But—”

“But you can’t,” Revi finished. “Not always. I wish you could.”

Seven looked from one to the other, her nascent ire subsiding under their unity. “Very well. I accept this for now.”

Troi smiled. “I’m on probation, I see. It won’t be the first time, nor the last.” Looking back at Revi, she continued, “You said your offer to your mother wasn’t intentional. Why do you think you made it?”

“I don’t know. It just came out. No, really,” she said in response to the clear expression of skepticism on Troi’s face. “It did. We were arguing about my father—as usual—and she was defending him, as usual, and then I told her that nothing had changed in all the years I was gone. She
said I was right, nothing had changed because I still didn’t believe that they loved me. And then she said she wished she could be in our link for just a moment, so that I could see for myself. You have to understand, for her to even say that was phenomenal. She’s been under my father’s thumb my whole life, and he’d just as soon shoot a telepath as look at one. I couldn’t believe those words came out of her mouth. I asked her if she meant it, and she said she did. So I made the offer before I could even think about it. Believe me, I was sorry afterward.”

“You did it before you could think about it. Which means your motivation wasn’t conscious. But you did have a motivation, or you’d never have opened yourself up to such a difficult possibility. Think about how you felt when you were arguing with her. Try to remember. You were upset, angry…and then you couldn’t believe that she’d said such a thing. So you made the offer…” she trailed off, looking at Revi expectantly.

Revi stared at her. “Because…I never thought she’d take me up on it,” she said slowly. “I thought it was safe.”

“In other words, you made an offer you were certain she’d turn down.”

“And she did, too. At first. I told her it was possible, and she looked shocked, and when I asked her if she meant it she tried to dance around it. So I started to walk away. That’s when she said she’d do it.”

“But what was the point? Why make her an offer if you were so certain she’d reject it?”

Seven felt a frisson of realization go through their link as Revi heard the word reject. Suddenly she understood exactly what Troi was pushing for, and looked at the counselor with new respect. She’d had eight days to think about that encounter between Revi and her mother, but eight years wouldn’t have been enough time for her to make the logical leap that Counselor Troi had just accomplished in a few minutes.

“You chose that word intentionally,” said Revi.

“Which word?”

“Reject. Don’t even try to play innocent.”

Troi’s smile was gentle. “Sometimes it’s harder to work with patients as intelligent as you are, because they’re picking apart my word choices and looking for hidden agendas. And sometimes it’s easier, because they’re picking apart my word choices and making leaps of understanding without my having to lead them every step of the way. I’m so glad you’re the latter type.”
Revi wasn’t immune to the compliment. “So you think I made that offer because I equated Mother’s rejection of it with a broader rejection of me?”

“The more important question is, what do you think?”

After a long pause, Revi said, “I never wanted to go there in the first place. I knew it would be awful. But it seemed so cowardly not to…I guess I figured that if I made a good faith effort to connect with her, and she turned it down, then I could wash my hands of the whole thing and be done with it. It would be proof that she didn’t love me enough to try.”

“So you set yourself up for disappointment.”

“I suppose so. But she surprised me.”

Troi said nothing, letting that sink in for a few moments. Seven’s mind was whirling, and though unsure of her place in this conversation, she was burning with a need to know.

“Aren’t you going to take the next step?”

Both of them turned to look at her. “Which step would that be?” asked Troi.

“This is about motivation. We understand now why Revi made the offer. But what was her motivation for agreeing to the link? She didn’t have to do it.” She met Revi’s eyes. “You didn’t have to say yes. You were torn. You said—” she slipped into the memory, quoting verbatim— “I don’t really have a choice, do I? I said of course you do. You said no, I don’t. If I don’t do this, I’ll never know.”

“I meant I’d never know why. Why he didn’t love me, why she never protected me.”

“But that’s the conscious motivation. Counselor Troi has already proved that you had an unconscious motivation for the link offer. What was the unconscious motivation for accepting?”

“Does there have to be an unconscious motivation for everything?” asked Revi with some heat.

“Doesn’t there?”

“Not necessarily,” said Troi, frustrating what Seven had thought was an excellent flow of logic. “However, in this case I think there might have been.”

Pleased, Seven looked at Revi.

Who was not nearly so pleased as Seven. “You know, I really don’t
need the two of you ganging up on me,” she said. “One of you counseling me is plenty.”

Seven drew back in hurt surprise. After the previous day and night, when she’d used every bit of her support and love to hold Revi together—

: Why are you angry with me? : she asked, forgetting Troi’s instruction in her distress.

Revi closed her eyes, the guilt instantly swamping her.

: I’m sorry… :

“Ladies? Aloud, please?”

“I’m sorry, Seven. Damn.” Revi took a deep breath, trying to center herself. “Okay. I appreciate what you’re doing, and I love you for trying to help, but right now I really think I can only handle one person pushing me.”

“Counseling is hard work,” said Troi. Seven wasn’t sure who she was addressing until their eyes met as she added, “The reason some motivations are unconscious is because we don’t consciously want to know what they are. Digging down to them means getting past a layer of protective resistance. And that often results in anger as we push back against the person doing the digging. Revi wasn’t upset with you. She was upset because we’re right at that layer of resistance.”

Seven took a moment to digest that. “Do your clients often get angry at you?”

“Oh yes.” Troi smiled. “Until they figure out what the anger is really about.”

“I would not want your job,” Seven told her sincerely, and Troi laughed.

“It has its moments. But it also has great rewards.” She turned back to Revi. “You’re an extremely self-aware individual. I think you know why you accepted when your mother called your bluff. You wanted something out of it. What was it?”

A thick silence fell as Revi considered it. It was difficult for Seven to stay out of her mind, to let her jump from one thought to the next without joining her and trying to help, but she managed it by distracting herself. Looking around the office, she noted every decoration on the walls and wondered about its real purpose. This was a counseling office; surely those images and art selections were chosen for a reason. That scene of the wave crashing onto a rock—it wasn’t a scene of serenity; maybe it was supposed to inspire another emotion? A sense of power?
Freedom? Perhaps destruction; water was one of the most destructive forces on most planets, given enough time for its erosive powers to have an effect.

She was so successful at her self-distraction that Revi’s voice startled her.

“I wanted an apology.”

Seven looked back in time to see Troi nodding encouragingly. “For not protecting you?”

“For everything. I wanted her to admit how fucked my entire childhood was. I want her to say my father was a bastard—is a bastard, and she was wrong for not protecting me, and that I have the right to be angry, and that she’s sorry.”

“Did you get it?”

“Part of it. She’ll never admit Father is a bastard. She defended him to the bitter end. But she did apologize for not stepping in; for not seeing it.”

“And did that help? Did you feel better?”

With a bitter laugh, Revi said, “I felt worse. I’m even angrier now than I was before. And confused as hell.”

“This may surprise you,” said Troi, “but that’s actually a good sign. The anger, I mean. Though we’ll be talking about appropriate ways to express it with your mother.”

Seven thought she was right—it did surprise them.

“Care to explain that?” asked Revi.

“Certainly. In order to be angry at how you were treated, you first have to feel that you have the right to your anger. That you deserve better. And that requires a certain amount of self-worth. Which, I think, is something you haven’t had in abundance for a while.” She smiled. “But that’s changing.”

Revi looked at her in wonder. “I never thought of anger as a positive sign before.”

“Wait,” said Seven. “Revi’s anger is a positive sign, but mine is not? I’m supposed to be learning how to manage mine, and you’re encouraging her to feel hers?”

Troi smiled. “There’s no contradiction. It’s not about the emotion. It’s about the expression of it.”

Picking up her mug, Revi raised it in a toast. “Welcome to therapy, Seven. Where confusion is the name of the game.”
*BEEP.*

Gohat looked up at the soft confirmation. Rising from his chair, he crossed over to the communications panel and checked the results. One more command had been carried out. At this rate he would indeed be ready for tomorrow night.

Losing Wiler had been a tremendous blow. While he knew that there were other Humans receptive to Cardassian employers, he had not been the one responsible for hiring. That had been Dukali’s role, and as per their training, Dukali had never recorded any of his contact information where it might be compromised. When he’d died, the information had died with him. Gohat had been left with no resources other than the one previously contracted for this assignment—and that single resource had been neutralized before he could locate the target.

But not before he had given Gohat the means of locating her himself. Hamilton, along with the other two Borg women, was apparently required to return to her ship every four days to plug into the Borg systems on board. That was what she had been doing the night of their first attempt, and Wiler’s data showed that she had returned twice since then, each visit precisely four days apart. The last one had been three days ago, right before Wiler dropped out of contact.

Fortunately, Wiler had managed to complete the interface in time.
Gohat knew enough about Starfleet systems to understand precisely how difficult that must have been, particularly without direct access to the ship. The Human had indeed been worth his fee. It was too bad he’d been picked up, but Gohat didn’t need him anymore. Once this job was complete, he had no intention of ever taking another contract on this planet. It was time to return to Cardassia. Perhaps, with a little cosmetic surgery, he could start over again. Maybe even purchase some land, and live out his days in peace.

Humming softly, he initiated the next command and sent it on its way, confident that the Starfleet personnel on Voyager would no more notice this one than they’d noticed the previous twelve. Bit by bit, command by command, he was putting together an elegant trap. It took time, since each command had to go through the interface and wait for precisely the right moment to enter the datastream, but time was something he had plenty of. There were only six more commands needed, and he had more than twenty-four hours left.

A soft chime alerted him to an incoming message. Frowning, he accessed it and shook his head. Yet another order from their employer, demanding confirmation that the contract had been cancelled. This one even included an offer of doubling the pay.

Being Human, their employer couldn’t possibly understand that this was not about pay. The moment that Hamilton had killed his friends, her death had ceased to be a contractual matter.

Now it was personal.
Alison closed the file, sent the changes to the central computer and sat back in her chair. She was done for the day, and really should go home—the rest of her staff had left two hours previously—but for some reason she wasn’t feeling all that anxious to leave. Lazy, maybe. Or maybe just in the habit of staying ridiculously late, as she had been since this whole thing with Lynne and the board had turned her life upside down.

Or maybe you’re hoping for a visitor.

She picked up her antique pen and twirled it between her fingers, examining that thought. She’d definitely enjoyed the company last night. Elise Hamilton was charming, witty and intelligent—but this she’d known for years. What she hadn’t known about was the depth of character and complexity of personality, or the previously unsuspected integrity that had led Elise to put truth ahead of family, and then turn around and tell her family member precisely what she’d done. She was willing to pay the price for her decisions. Alison found that refreshing beyond belief. She had no patience for shallow, calculating people, of whom there were depressing multitudes in her professional life. Not here in the Foundation building, for the most part. But up in the higher economic levels, the circles through which she moved as the Foundation’s public face, it often seemed as if the more wealth an individual had, the shallower and more selfish they were. As recently as four days ago,
during the last board meeting, she’d thought Elise belonged in that category.

She was wrong. And when it came to judging character, she wasn’t often mistaken. That alone had made her very curious about what made Elise Hamilton tick. They’d ended up talking until nearly midnight last night, about anything and everything, and the topic apparently didn’t exist to which Elise couldn’t make an interesting and informed contribution. Well, except for nuts and bolts physics. But rarely had Alison enjoyed a conversation more.

If she were honest with herself, she had to admit that the undercurrent of doubt made it interesting as well. No matter how much her instincts and logic told her that Elise couldn’t be the one who’d hired the assassins, the fact remained that she was still a suspect—and that lent an edge to everything they said to each other.

*I want to see her again,* she realized. But was it even appropriate? Elise sat on the board, she answered to that board…it wasn’t exactly a supervisor/subordinate relationship, but it wasn’t completely unrelated either. Then there was the issue of her new stewardship of Lynne’s trust, formerly overseen in part by Elise. Was there a conflict of interest in that? And even if there wasn’t in the business sense, surely there was in terms of Lynne’s current situation. Alison might not be entirely certain how she felt about Elise, but she had no doubts whatsoever regarding her loyalty toward Lynne.

Then again, perhaps she *should* pursue a friendship, for the very reason of that loyalty. Elise was still a suspect, and so was her family. Maybe Alison could learn something.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” she grumbled, tossing her pen back onto the desk. “This is ridiculous. I need to go home.”

She was just gathering up her briefcase when her desk terminal chirped. Glancing at the caller’s name, she dropped the case and accepted. “Lynne, how are you?”

“Great,” said Lynne, holding up a small, dark, square object. “Gretchen made brownies, so all’s well in my world.”

Alison shook her head. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say your world was enviably simple.”

“Don’t I wish. Hey, do you have FedComm on?”

“No, should I?”
“Yes. They’re showing a replay of Kathryn’s speech in Geneva. Christ, the crowd’s estimated at seventy-five thousand. I’m married to a rock star.”

Alison activated her large wall monitor and quickly found the broadcast. “I’ve got it. Whoa, that is a big crowd.” The camera was panning over a vast sea of people, Human and otherwise, surrounding a central podium with a single figure on it. Kathryn Janeway looked tiny from this perspective, and utterly vulnerable on the stage. But she seemed comfortable, addressing the crowd with that easy tone of voice Alison recognized. “She sounds the same whether she’s talking to a few people or a few thousand, doesn’t she?”

“That woman would not know stage fright if it came up and bit her in the ass. I would die on a stage like that. But that’s not why I called. Kathryn gave me a heads up a little earlier; she said she had a last-minute guest at her speech. Wait a bit and you’ll see.”

“Okay.” She watched as Kathryn wrapped up her talk, accepted the cheers of the crowd with a smile and a wave, and then held out a hand to signal for quiet.

“I have someone else who’d like a word, and given that he outranks me to a significant degree, I really couldn’t say no.” A wave of laughter from the audience. “Please welcome the President of the United Federation of Planets, Ferdinand Gutierrez!”

“Gutierrez is horning in on her speech?” asked Alison in surprise. “What a moron! Grandstanding on her popularity one day after threatening to have her demoted—he’s an asswipe.”

“What?!” Lynne roared with laughter. “Asswipe? You have got to be kidding me. I swear, the things that survived into this century…” She laughed again, then shook her head. “Never mind. Just listen.”

Gutierrez had taken the stage, looking statesmanlike as usual in his dark business suit with the trademark Federation logo tie. “Thank you, thank you…” He got the crowd quieted down—Alison thought uncharitably that it had probably taken Kathryn much longer to still the applause for her—and began to speak. “I’m honored to share a stage with Captain Janeway. Her strength of spirit, her sense of hope, and her absolute refusal to give up in the face of adversity embody some of the best principles that the Federation stands for. We, too, have fought against impossible odds. We, too, refused to give up. And in
the end, we won the Dominion War. But not without cost. Three years later we are still rebuilding.

“One of the greatest lessons we learned from the war is that we cannot stand as a divided federation. It was only our unity of purpose that enabled us to prevail against such a powerful enemy. A unity that came from setting aside our personal differences. But the return of Voyager has reminded us that there is still one group of people whose differences we never forgave. They violated a treaty, and for that they are called traitors. But they called themselves freedom fighters—the Maquis. The treaty they violated is the same one that Cardassia itself tore up four years later, when it attacked the Federation without provocation or warning.

“Most of the Maquis never acted against Federation members or property; in fact, their purpose was to protect the Federation property that was ceded in the treaty, and the Federation colonists who refused to leave their homes. Their real crime, in most instances, was simply to recognize the war before the rest of us did. And the vast majority of them paid with their lives, when the Cardassians eradicated their bases.

“One small band of Maquis escaped this fate, only to be thrown seventy thousand light years away from home. Thrown with them was Voyager, the ship assigned to find and apprehend them. What these two crews did is now legend. The Maquis sacrificed their ship to help save an entire species, and gave up their freedom in order to work with Captain Janeway and the Starfleet crew toward a common goal—getting home. They forged the ultimate compromise, even knowing that success might mean imprisonment. But they did it because it was the right thing to do.

“The Federation Council has been debating this situation for far too long. Voyager has been home for nearly a month already, yet her Maquis crew are trapped in a legal limbo. I say it’s time to bring them all the way home. Seven years is long enough—let’s call it time served, and free these people to go to their homes and families. I call upon the Council to end this debate and do the right thing. Just as these Maquis did the right thing, seven years ago.”

The crowd roared its approval, while on stage Kathryn turned to the President and shook his hand. With a genial smile, he used the handshake to pull her into an embrace instead, inciting even more cheers. They broke apart and turned, waving in tandem at the crowd.

“Do you believe that?” asked Lynne. “Whatever he thinks I have on him, it must be spectacularly bad. I never expected him to do anything like this. Not that I’m complaining.”

Alison watched thoughtfully as the President smiled and waved,
soaking up the approval. “I don’t think so,” she said. “I think this was just his best strategic move.”

“How so?”

“He lost his gamble with you, in a big way. You gave him an out predicated on breaking the stalemate in the Council. Before that point he had a lot to lose if he took a stand on the Maquis situation and it turned out to be the unpopular one, but as of yesterday he had nothing to lose anymore, and a lot to gain. He had to act with the Council. So he just gambled again, and instead of throwing his weight around the usual way, behind chamber doors, he made a big public splash instead. And he did it in a manner that was practically guaranteed to meet with public approval. Pleading for amnesty while standing next to Kathryn in front of seventy-five thousand people? That does two things—it virtually guarantees a positive vote from the Council members, who are not going to want to look like unforgiving bastards in the face of this, and it also puts him in the front of the issue. He just took ownership of all the goodwill that vote will generate. I hate to say it, but this was genius. He’s an ass, but he’s also a good politician.”

“So by ‘good politician’ you mean cynical, manipulative, and completely bereft of integrity?”

“You don’t like politicians much, do you?”

“Do you? So far as I can tell, they haven’t changed a bit since my time. Gutierrez would have fit right in.”

Alison decided not to point out that Kathryn herself was something of a politician by necessity. “Did you notice that he used your phrasing? Some of that speech sounded like it was taken almost verbatim from the scenario you gave him.”

“Oh yeah, I noticed. He’s welcome to plagiarize all he wants to, as long as the Maquis get amnesty.” Lynne scowled. “However, he is not welcome to paw my wife. That little touchy-feely hug pissed me off. Kathryn said it was like being hugged by a Taldarian slime mold.”

Alison laughed. “Ew. That was not a mental image I needed, thank you. Oh, now we’re getting the analysts talking about the speech. I’ve seen enough.” She deactivated the monitor and turned back to her terminal. “Congratulations, Lynne. Your shipmates owe you a huge debt of gratitude. This is quite an accomplishment.”

“Well, it’s not accomplished yet. I’m not celebrating until the vote is
in. And as for my shipmates—those people saved my life. They don’t owe me anything.” Lynne looked to the side and broke into a huge smile. “Hi, love! Welcome back! Alison and I just watched the replay. She wishes it could have been her getting that hug from Gutierrez.” She turned back and added unnecessarily, “Kathryn just got home.”

Alison heard a voice in the background, and a moment later Lynne scooted to the side to make room for another face in the video link. “Hello, Alison,” said Kathryn. “No, you don’t. It was disgusting. He has sweaty hands.”

“Ew!” Alison held up her hands in protest. “Stop! I don’t need to hear any more.”

Lynne took advantage of her wife’s proximity to kiss her cheek. “You were spectacular.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.” Kathryn actually looked embarrassed, which Alison found rather cute.

“You really do know how to work a crowd, Kathryn,” she said. “Ever think about running for public office?”

“Oh, that was uncalled for,” said Lynne with a mock glare. “And what the hell are you doing at the office this late, anyway? Go home.”

“Good idea, I think I will. Congratulations to both of you. I mean it. And thanks for cluing me in; I probably wouldn’t have heard about it until I checked the newsfeeds tomorrow morning.”

“You’re welcome.” Lynne looked over to the side. “Whoops, somebody just woke up. Time for the evening feeding.”

“Barney? Can I see him?”

Lighting up, Lynne said, “Sure! Hang on a sec.” She vanished from the screen as Kathryn pursed her lips.

“You’d think that kitten was the only pet in the house,” she said. “We do have a dog, you know. A perfectly lovely dog who just greeted me when I came in the door. Unlike my wife,” she called out.

“Give it up,” came Lynne’s voice from somewhere in the room. “You can’t complain; your wife was busy watching you on FedComm and thinking about how hot you look in your dress uniform.”

Kathryn instantly blushed and looked back at Alison. “I should know better than to give her an opening.”

“Yes, you should.” Lynne had reappeared and was holding something
just below the level of the screen. “Okay, ready for an overdose of cuteness?”

“I’m ready,” said Alison, who was thoroughly enjoying this glimpse into their lives.

Lynne lifted her hands, revealing a tiny bundle of gray and black fur that fit comfortably in one palm. With the other hand curved protectively around him, she said, “Barney, this is Alison. Alison, meet Barney.”

“Oh, my God. He’s so cute!”

“Told you,” said Lynne with parental satisfaction.

“Molly’s cute too,” said Kathryn in an aggrieved tone.

“Kathryn, I’m sorry, but Molly weighs thirty kilograms. That instantly disqualifies her for cute. She’s pretty, but not cute. Besides, she slobbers on my hand every time I try to pet her.”

“That’s just a dog kiss. And how can you have an issue with doggy kisses when you’re burping and pooping a kitten five times a day?”

Alison cracked up laughing. The sight of the great Kathryn Janeway, in full dress uniform, talking about burping and pooping a kitten was just too much to handle.

“It’s different,” Lynne insisted, petting Barney’s tiny head. “Isn’t it, Barney? You’re not going to need my help much longer. Then you’ll be ready to take over the world.”

“He’s already taken over your world,” said Kathryn, but the softness in her smile gave her away. And when Lynne looked up to meet the smile, Alison felt as if she were intruding on something private.

“Did you ever find out where he came from?” she asked.

Lynne shook her head. “So far as we’ve heard, no one has reported losing a pregnant cat. I really think his mother was dumped.”

“Whoever did that needs to be taken out and shot.”

“I agree,” said Kathryn, her face hardening. “That’s unacceptable. And there’s no reason for it.”

“I just wish we’d found them earlier,” said Lynne. “It hurts to think of his littermate dying from starvation and exposure.”

Kathryn extended a finger, rubbing Barney’s cheek. “But Barney didn’t, because of you. Just remember that.” Barney turned his head and began mouthing Kathryn’s finger while Lynne petted him with obvious adoration. The scene was so impossibly domestic that Alison felt a small ache.

“Well, thank you very much for introducing me,” she said. “That is
one lucky kitten, and someday I’d love to meet him in person. But in the meantime I think I’ll take your advice and head home. Congratulations again, both of you.”

After exchanging their good nights, Alison closed down her office and walked out through the quiet Foundation building. Normally she found this time of night to be peaceful, a good time to get things done, but right now the building just seemed…empty. And she was suddenly feeling tired and a little sad.

*It’s just been a long day,* she thought as she waved at the downstairs security guard and pushed open the door. A very crisp Denver night met her, and she enjoyed the tingling in her lungs as she drew in the cold air. But it didn’t drive out her melancholy, and as she keyed open her transport and tossed in her briefcase, she reluctantly admitted the obvious cause.

*I wonder how Lynne and Kathryn would feel about an unexpected guest for dinner?*

But of course that wasn’t possible, and even if it was, it did nothing to address the underlying issue.

*I wonder how Elise would feel about an unexpected invitation to dinner?*

That was more possible…barely.

Sighing, she powered up the engine and headed for home.
Dinner at the Janeway farmhouse was a happy affair, with the six women in attendance having plenty to talk about. The primary topic was of course the President’s plea for amnesty, and Kathryn ribbed Lynne a bit by proposing a toast to ‘the second best negotiator on Voyager.’

“Look out, Kathryn, your job may be in danger,” said Revi. “It’s the assistants you always have to watch out for. Or in your case, the personal security escorts.”

“Oh, believe me, I would never want Kathryn’s job,” Lynne said. “At least, not that part of it. The part about being totally in control and having everyone at your beck and call is pretty cool, though.”

“At least now I know you were paying attention,” teased Kathryn. “And all this time I thought you were bored out of your mind when I dragged you to negotiations.”

“I was bored out of my mind. But my meeting with Gutierrez wasn’t like those multi-day headaches you used to deal with. I had something he wanted and I wouldn’t give it to him until he gave me what I wanted. That’s just old fashioned horse trading.”

“Yeah, with the biggest stable owner in the quadrant,” said Phoebe. “So now will you let me tell Chakotay what you did?”

Kathryn looked up in surprise. “Chakotay?”
She saw her mother and Lynne exchange glances as Phoebe said, “He came into my gallery last week. I told Mom and Lynne yesterday, didn’t they tell you?”

“No.” Kathryn looked at them accusingly. “Somehow the message didn’t get to me.”

“Oh us,” said Revi. “I’m so sorry we missed him.”

Her sarcasm was lost on Phoebe, who gave Revi a comforting smile.

“It kind of got lost in everything else,” Gretchen told Kathryn. “And there wasn’t really a message.”

“He was looking for you while you were incognito,” explained Phoebe. “I was easier to find.”

“Funny, I’ve spoken with him twice in the last three days. He never mentioned coming to Bloomington.” Kathryn wasn’t liking the sound of this at all.

“Well, I don’t think he forgot. We spent practically the whole day talking. He’s really a charming man.” Phoebe was oblivious to the undercurrent that had suddenly developed at the table. “Anyway, Lynne was being a hardass and said I couldn’t tell him anything about her meeting with the President. But I think that concern is kind of moot now, don’t you? The whole Federation knows. Nothing like blowing a secret wide open. So when’s the party going to be?”

“After the vote,” said Lynne firmly. “No way are we celebrating anything before it happens.”

“I think you should have it on Voyager,” Phoebe decided. “It’s poetic. Celebrate their freedom in the same place where they gave it up seven years ago. Closing the circle, you know? Besides, I still haven’t had my tour. I’m curious to see how much bigger the captain’s quarters are than the first officer’s.”

“Starfleet might have something to say about unauthorized personnel wandering all over what is currently considered classified technology,” said Kathryn. Though she had to admit, the idea of having most of her crew back on board Voyager again was very appealing. They could convert the shuttle bay into a nice party venue, especially with the bay doors open to the view of San Francisco. Neelix would be all over the idea.

“I hardly think it could be considered ‘wandering’ if I were being escorted by the captain,” said Phoebe. “Or the first officer.”
“I didn’t realize—” Seven began, then fell abruptly silent.
“What?” asked Phoebe.
“That…you had never been aboard Voyager before.”
Kathryn knew that wasn’t what she’d meant to say, and guessed that Revi had given her a silent instruction of some kind. What exactly was going on here?
“No, I haven’t. Kathryn had just taken command when Voyager went into the Badlands. And when you all finally came back here, Admiral Necheyev would only let Mother go meet you at the rendezvous site.”
“Ooo, sore point,” said Lynne undiplomatically.
“Fine, joke about it. But the fact remains that I’m the only one at this table who has never seen Kathryn’s ship.” Phoebe took a bite of food and chewed in pointed silence.
“It’s actually not a bad idea,” said Kathryn, feeling some diplomatic pressure to make a gesture toward her sister. “Having a party on board, I mean. Might be the perfect way to end our journey.”
“Can you get the clearance?” asked Revi.
“I’m not sure. It would depend on Admiral Necheyev’s mood, which in turn seems to depend on what day of the week it is.”
“The shuttle bay was not altered,” said Seven, apparently having read Kathryn’s mind earlier. “It contains no classified technology, and it has direct access through the bay doors. Surely Starfleet could give clearance for that.”
“We’ll have to park the Delta Flyer outside,” said Lynne. “The other shuttles could just be tucked up next to the bulkheads.”
“And Neelix could spend a whole day decorating. He’ll think he died and went to the Great Forest,” said Revi.
“The Great Forest?” Gretchen raised her eyebrows.
“Talaxian version of the afterlife,” Revi explained.
“Does that mean you’re going to ask about it?” Her earlier pique forgotten, Phoebe was now practically bouncing in place. “I think it’s a great idea!”
Kathryn looked around the table and sighed. “I’ll see what I can do.”
“What’s going on with Phoebe and Chakotay?” asked Kathryn almost the moment they were alone in their room.

“I don’t know. I’m just guessing.” Lynne set Barney’s box on the floor and paused to make sure his sleep hadn’t been disturbed. “But it sure looks like she’s interested in him. And given the fact that he invited her to his family ranch in Arizona, it looks like he’s interested in her, too.”

“Great. I’d better warn him.”

“Whoa, what?” Lynne looked up in surprise. “Isn’t that a bit out of line?”

“Phoebe is a Human shuttle crash when it comes to relationships. She goes in hard and lands hard, usually with collateral damage. Chakotay has no idea what he’s getting himself into.”

“You will not do yourself any favors by getting into the middle of that one, Kathryn. Stay out of it.”

“I am not going to stay out of it! I don’t need Phoebe screwing up one of my staff.” She was getting angry just thinking about it.

“Uh, Kathryn? At the moment, Chakotay is not one of your staff. What’s really happening here?”

“Nothing changes, does it?” Kathryn walked to the window, gazing out at the moonlit snowscape. “It doesn’t matter how much time goes by or what I do, Phoebe still walks blithely in and takes over the room. All the effort I put into my working relationship with Chakotay—for seven goddamned years—and she’s going to plant herself in the middle, just like that. And he’ll never know what hit him, and when it all crashes and burns, I’ll be the one left to pick up the pieces of a working relationship that’s suddenly very awkward because Phoebe is my sister.” She shook her head. “Didn’t take her long, as usual.”

Lynne joined her at the window. “There’s some history here that I haven’t heard about.”

“Yes, you have. It’s just the same old thing. She’s done this all my life. I was always doing everything I was supposed to, and she always ran wild, and Mom and Dad said that was just how she was and they never yanked her back in line. She got away with murder, while I was working my ass off just to hear my father say he was proud of me, and he never did…” She trailed off, realizing what she was saying. “You know, I think being in this house is starting to get to me. Maybe it’s time for us to start looking for our own place.”
“Maybe it is,” said Lynne. “But in the meantime you really should remember one thing.”

“What’s that?” She wasn’t sure she wanted to hear it.

“Phoebe is not the woman who stood in front of seventy-five thousand cheering people in Geneva today. She’s not the woman I watched on FedComm, with a huge smile on my face because I was thinking, ‘That’s my Kathryn.’ She’s not you. I like her a lot, but I don’t admire her. I admire you. And I’m proud of you.”

Even if she hadn’t known that Lynne wouldn’t say it if she didn’t mean it, the look in those green eyes would have convinced her. Suddenly she was a little embarrassed that Lynne could see through her so easily, and at the same time grateful for that very thing. Stepping in for a hug, she asked, “How do you always know exactly what to say?”

“I don’t.” Lynne squeezed her and dropped a kiss on her head. “I probably screw it up at least as often as I get it right.”

“You get it right more often than I do.”

“That’s not true. But let’s see if I’m on a roll. I think it’s just possible that Chakotay is not the one who’ll get burned in this.”

Kathryn leaned away, keeping her arms around Lynne’s waist. “What makes you say that?”

“Why do you think he’s interested? What does he see in her?”

She shrugged. “What they all see in her. The passion, the spontaneity, the sense of being on a wild ride…”

“Does that sound like Chakotay?”

“Hm.” Put that way, it didn’t sound much like Chakotay at all. “Not really. So what do you think he sees in her?”

“I think he sees you.”

Kathryn stared at her. “What?”

“He sees the Janeway he can have. Once, a long time ago, you and he might have had something. You’ve put that a long way behind you. But he hasn’t. And now, all of sudden, there’s another Janeway available. One who’s interested in him, in the way you never were. How could he not find that appealing?”

“Damn. I’d never have thought of that.” But it was...plausible.

“That’s because you’re used to thinking in terms of Phoebe stealing your thunder, instead of you stealing hers. She will never be what Chakotay’s looking for, because she isn’t you. So unless he figures it out, and
changes his ideas of what he wants, any crashing of this shuttle is probably going to be because of him, not her. What’s so funny?” she asked as Kathryn began to chuckle.

“Would you believe I’m suddenly feeling protective of my sister? Now I want to go warn her.”

Lynne winced. “Oh yeah, that’ll fly. ‘Phoebe, you should stay away from Chakotay, because you’re only going to get hurt. It’s not you he wants, it’s me.’”

“Ooo. I can just see her face.” Actually, the thought had a certain appeal.

“And I can see evil thoughts in your head.” But Lynne was smiling, and Kathryn leaned in to kiss her.

“Thank you. I feel a lot better.”

“Any time.” Lynne touched her forehead to Kathryn’s. “So, on a whole different topic, how did your debriefings go today? You didn’t talk much about anything besides Geneva.”

Kathryn jerked upright. “Oh, god, do I have things to tell you. Hold on, I want to show you something.” She hurried over to her briefcase and pulled out Necheyev’s PADD, quickly accessing the schematic for the Tagus. “Take a look at this.”

Lynne accepted the PADD. “Which ship is this?”

“It’s a prototype of a new model in the Saber class. With a gorgeous new engine that pumps up the top speed from nine point seven to nine eight five.”

“Whoa, that’s a huge difference. But…I don’t know what the Saber class is.”

“Sabers are light cruisers, about half the mass of Voyager. They’re just about the most compact ships in the fleet—small, fast, maneuverable, and heavily armed for their size. They carry a crew of forty, but can accommodate two hundred in an emergency evacuation. Cochrane warp core, dual nacelles, and get this—redundant impulse systems. They were invaluable during the Dominion War.”

“Okay. What does this have to do with your debriefing?”

“Nothing. It has to do with my promotion to admiral.”

Lynne’s jaw dropped. “What? You got a promotion and you just forgot to mention that little fact earlier?”

“No, no, I didn’t get a promotion, sorry.” Kathryn laughed at the look
on her face. “I didn’t mean to get you fired up. But Necheyev is dangling a very big carrot in front of me. She’s impressed by the designs we came up with on *Voyager*—the slipstream drive, the Borg systems, the *Delta Flyer*—and she seems to think I could leverage that experience into the top job in the ship design wing of Starfleet. It would come with a promotion to rear admiral. And it would put me in charge of *all* Starfleet ship design.”

“Kathryn, that’s fantastic! Jesus! Why the hell didn’t you say anything before?”

“Because it’s not anything close to certain. I told you, Necheyev is dangling a carrot. First of all, these schematics are a test. She said she was just interested in my preliminary evaluation of the design in two days, but what that really means is that I need to demonstrate total understanding of the design’s improvements and possible pitfalls. And if I can suggest something that has been previously overlooked, so much the better. She also thinks I’ve gotten a little too used to being at the top of the hierarchy. This post is essentially a prize if I manage to convince her that I can reintegrate into the command structure.”

“So you’re practicing how to say ‘yes, ma’am’ and ‘no, ma’am,’ right?”

“Every morning in the mirror.”

“Well, you could practice on me.” Lynne grinned. “I think I’d enjoy it.”

“In your dreams.”

“But this would mean staying on Earth, wouldn’t it? You wouldn’t have another ship.”

“I’d be stationed planetside, yes. But it would mean you could go climbing to your heart’s content anywhere on Earth and still be just a transport relay away. And we could buy or build a house and know that we’d stay in it for the foreseeable future. Not only that, but I could offer posts to Seven, B’Elanna, Tom and Harry, Tuvok—and maybe some of my engineering department. You know B’Elanna and Tom won’t want to be shipping out any time soon, not with Miral on the way. You’d be close to your goddaughter. Tom would be in heaven—he’d get to design *and* test pilot new ships. Harry might not want to stay, but at least he’d have an excellent option. And Seven…well, she might have a reason not to go to Vulcan. I know that if she wanted to stay, Revi would too. And Starfleet Medical would give Revi anything she wanted if she’d sign on with them. They’ve already made an offer of her own department. Tuvok’s experience in defensive and offensive designs would be invaluable—he’s the one who
came up with the unimatrix shielding on the Delta Flyer. He could do a lot of work from Vulcan, and stay with his family. I could keep almost my entire senior staff.”

Glancing at the PADD, Lynne said, “It sounds too good to be true. There’s only one thing you haven’t covered. Would you be happy?”

Kathryn hesitated. “I think so. To be honest, I don’t like the idea of giving up a ship of my own. But the truth is that if I took command of another ship, I’d be at the beck and call of Starfleet and you know, Necheyev has a point. I’m not used to that anymore. Can you see me escorting politicians to conferences, or doing glorified courier duty?”

“No way. But wouldn’t you take another science vessel?”

“Not unless it’s Voyager, and I don’t think she’ll be allowed back into space any time soon. I don’t want any other Intrepid ship besides her, and there aren’t any other science ships as good as the Intrepids. So unless Starfleet gives Voyager back to me, I’d be looking at stepping up in class. And that means Galaxy or Sovereign.”

“Which are huge and designed for extended missions.”

“Right. We’d be gone for long periods. And I’d have a crew seven times the size of Voyager’s. Which means I’d be commanding a city in space—I’d never get to know them all. It wouldn’t be the same.”

Lynne looked at her closely. “But isn’t that what you wanted when you left science and went onto the command track? Wasn’t that your goal, commanding the best ship? Picard told me at the party on the Enterprise that he’s turned down a promotion because he’s exactly where he wants to be—in command of Starfleet’s flagship. And Riker turned down his own captaincy because he prefers being first officer on the best ship to being captain of a lesser one.”

“That’s what I thought I wanted, yes. But I’m not the same person I was when I first started in command. My priorities have changed. And the biggest priority of all is right here.” She touched a finger to the tip of Lynne’s nose. “Do you want to go back out on long missions? Because I’m not leaving without you.”

“God, don’t put this decision on me. I want you to do whatever makes you truly happy. And I know that deep down, commanding your own ship gives you a special kind of satisfaction that you probably won’t ever find anywhere else. Yes, you’d be doing some courier duty if you were commanding a Galaxy or Sovereign ship. But according to Picard, the
missions also include a lot of the things you love—exploration, science, first contact, humanitarian aid…”

“I know. And I can’t say it’s not tempting. But so is the idea of staying right here and getting my hands dirty again. I’d love to dive into ship design! And after seven years in the Delta Quadrant I have some pretty good ideas of what does and doesn’t work. I could really make a difference.”

“Now that I have faith in, no matter what you choose. You’re always going to make a difference.”

Kathryn paused, warmed by Lynne’s unfailing belief. With a quick kiss of acknowledgment, she said, “This isn’t a decision we have to make tonight. I may not even get the offer at Ship Design; Necheyev was just exploring a possibility. And who knows what will happen in the next few months? No matter what, I’m taking my six months’ leave. The world could look a lot different at the end of it.”

“True.” Lynne handed the PADD back. “Well, congratulations anyway. Just the fact that Necheyev is thinking along those lines is pretty damned cool.”

“Thank you. Of course, she was freed to think along those lines by a certain wife of mine who apparently negotiated more than Maquis amnesty with the President.” She still wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

“I didn’t negotiate anything except for him to keep his slimy ass out of your career. He included your admiral’s bars in his initial offer, but I told him not to do you any favors. I know you, Kathryn. You’d hate the idea of getting a promotion based on wheeling and dealing. On the other hand, I also made it extremely clear that I’d better never hear his name in association with any kind of backlash against you.”

“Oh.” Suddenly she felt perfectly fine. “That explains, then. Yesterday afternoon his office withdrew his recommendation for my court-martial. Technically it doesn’t matter, because Starfleet wouldn’t allow the proceedings, but just the recommendation itself was a stain on my record. As of now it’s been expunged.”

“Good. You’re okay with that, right? It’s not really interfering.”

“Of course it’s interfering.” She hid a smile at Lynne’s look of dismay. “But yes, I’m okay with it. That recommendation was purely political; it had nothing to do with my capacity as a captain. So it’s not something I feel any moral obligation to deal with.”
“Whew. Your morals can be tricky things to anticipate.”

“That’s not true. When it comes to my job, my morals are all good.”

She deliberately lowered her voice. “And when it comes to you, they’re all bad.”

Lynne shivered. “Perfect. Those bad morals are my absolute favorites.”
“Bridge to Commander Tuvok.”

“Yes, Captain,” said Tuvok without opening his eyes.

“We’re entering the Ipsen system now. Estimated arrival is in eighteen minutes.”

“Very good. Thank you.”

He extinguished his meditation lamp and checked the chronometer, nodding in satisfaction. While he had been meditating, the Tagus had gone into another burst of high warp, bringing them into the Ipsen system ahead of schedule. It was indeed an efficient, fast ship. Captain Janeway would no doubt be entranced with it.

He had already made an appointment to speak with Dr. Trallek, using the fiction that he was a representative of the Vulcan Academy and involved in slipstream research. The name he’d given was that of an actual published Vulcan researcher in the field, in case Trallek bothered to check. It was possibly more subterfuge than necessary, but this was the most significant lead the case had yielded, and he was unwilling to take any risks.

By the time the Tagus established orbit around Ipsen Prime, Tuvok was on the bridge in civilian clothing, watching the planet on the main viewer. It was not a place most Humans would choose to inhabit. The lack of edible vegetation and the extremely thin atmosphere made it inhospitable to life, and the research facility was by necessity housed in atmospheric...
domes. But the planet held one great advantage for propulsion research: it was located away from shipping lanes and at the edge of a nearly empty sector of space, enabling the scientists to test volatile engine designs without burdensome regulation.

“Doesn’t look too inviting,” said Captain Jorel. “I guess we won’t be taking shore leave on this trip.”

“It is my hope that we will be leaving again within an hour of my appointment,” Tuvok informed him. “The opportunity for shore leave will be very small indeed.”

“That was a joke, Commander.”

“I am aware of that.”

Jorel, a young and—in Tuvok’s assessment—unseasoned Katarian looked at him with a broad grin. “So it’s true what they say about you Vulcans. You have no sense of humor.”

“On the contrary, we understand humor perfectly well. However, it is rare that we encounter an admirable example of it.”

Jorel’s grin simply grew wider. “Oh, well done. I guess you do get it.”

Two hours later, Tuvok was standing in Dr. Trallek’s research department, informing an assistant of his name and appointment. He reflected that whatever else Trallek might be, he was at least a capable supervisor, as the assistant had been expecting him and ushered him into Trallek’s office without delay.

“Dr. Vaalon, it’s a pleasure to meet you!” Trallek, a tall, thin Bajoran, came forward with his hand outstretched. “As you can imagine, I get very few visitors out here. I’m looking forward to discussing your work on nascent prolean pulses; it’s an area I find intriguing but don’t know nearly enough about.”

Tuvok shook the proffered hand and said, “I regret that such a discussion will not take place. My name is not Vaalon, it is Commander Tuvok of Starfleet Security, and I am here in an official capacity.”

“I don’t understand.” Trallek pulled his hand back. “Starfleet? Why? And why the false name?”

“Because I am investigating attempted murder, attempted sabotage, and the contractual hiring of assassins. In my experience, it is generally best to keep such investigations quiet until all relevant information has been collected.”

With each crime he listed, Trallek’s eyes grew wider and wider. “No
offense, Commander, but what are you doing here? We’re a research lab. The only relevant information we might have on murder and sabotage would be what we read in holonovels on our time off.”

“Your slipstream drive design was almost utilized by the USS Voyager in an effort to return from the Delta Quadrant,” said Tuvok, ignoring the protest. “Until it was discovered that such usage, without countermeasures, would have a one hundred percent probability of catastrophic failure. Starfleet does indeed consider this an act of sabotage.”

“What?” Trallek appeared stunned. “How did Voyager get that design? It was never meant for practical application!”

“If it was never meant for practical application, why did your final report to the Hamilton Foundation neglect to mention the phase variance? The one bit of data that clearly renders the design unusable?”

“Oh shit.” Trallek walked back to his chair and sank down into it, gesturing weakly at a visitor’s chair opposite. “That wasn’t supposed to matter. That report was just bureaucratic filler—I had to turn it in to keep my funding. I thought it would sit in a file and gather dust. Grant reports are not the same thing as refereed publications, Commander. When I solve this variance issue, I’ll be publishing as soon as possible, believe me. With all the relevant data. I don’t know how Voyager ended up with my grant report, or why anyone would have taken such a report as the final word on my research.”

Tuvok was unimpressed with the man’s effort to deflect responsibility. “So you admit to knowingly withholding critical data from your final report to the Hamilton Foundation.”

“It wasn’t critical data to the Foundation! It was critical to me. And it was just a grant report—how was I supposed to know that Starfleet would take it upon itself to use unpublished research?”

“My report will note your deep concern for the one hundred and forty-eight lives that were at risk due to this situation,” said Tuvok dryly. “I’m certain that will go a long way toward convincing a judge to be lenient while sentencing you for fraud.”

“Fraud! No. No way. I didn’t defraud anyone, least of all the Foundation. I had permission to leave that data out. From the very top.”

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. “Someone on the board of the Foundation?”

“Yes.” Trallek paused. “This isn’t going to get her in trouble, is it? She only did it as a favor to me. This is all just a...a mistake. A case of one
hand not knowing what the other was doing. There was never any sabotage.”

“Perhaps you can explain exactly what happened,” said Tuvok. “From the beginning.”

KATHRYN was in her third hour of debriefings when Necheyev’s aide entered the room, walked straight to the admiral, and whispered something that made her eyes narrow.

“This briefing is suspended for the day,” she announced as Sosallme quietly left the room. “An urgent matter has just come up. Captain Janeway, please stay.”

Admirals Hayes, Finnegan and Paris rose from their chairs—somewhat happily, Kathryn thought—and bade her farewell as they filed out of the room. In the sudden silence, she looked at Necheyev expectantly.

The admiral’s expression was one of fierce satisfaction as she said, “Tuvok has a name.”

IT TOOK two hours for a judge to sign a warrant of arrest, and less time than that to pinpoint the suspect’s whereabouts. To Kathryn’s surprise, Admiral Necheyev ordered her to accompany the arresting team. Certainly her presence was unnecessary, and there was no lack of other ways she needed to be spending her time. But Necheyev knew this was very personal to her, and Kathryn suspected she was being tossed a bone as an acknowledgment of her toeing the line so far. She recognized the command style because she’d done it many times herself—reward the effort to date and make it clear that further effort is expected. It had worked on nearly every officer she’d used it on, but she was a bit nonplussed to find herself on the other end of it. Nevertheless, she wasn’t about to argue. It was personal, and she wanted to be there.

Now she rode in a Starfleet transport, with a team of four security staff headed by Lieutenant Terrill. When they arrived at the entrance to the property, which was protected by a security field, Terrill hopped out of the transport with a small tool kit in hand. Within six minutes she had
disabled the field, replaced her tools and was back in the transport. Kathryn looked at her with new respect.

“Where did you learn that?” she asked.


Kathryn had very little time to mull over this unexpected bit of information before the transport was settling down in front of the expansive house. The team quickly spread out, covering both the front and back of the building, while Terrill and Kathryn went to the front door and rang the chime.

There was quite a long pause before they heard footsteps approaching. Kathryn guessed that they’d been checked out by remote video first, and could just imagine the conversation that had taken place inside the house.

The door opened, revealing a very surprised Elise Hamilton. “Captain Janeway? What are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry, Elise,” said Kathryn. “But this is not a social call.”

Silently, Terrill handed over the PADD with the warrant of arrest.
Alison felt a sense of déjà vu when she found Lynne calling her office at nearly the same time she had the previous night. “Hi, Lynne,” she said. “Should I be turning on my monitor?”

The joke fell flat, and she sobered at the look on Lynne’s face. “As a matter of fact, you should,” Lynne answered. “There’s a breaking report on right now.”

“Why do I get the feeling this is not good news?” Alison activated the monitor and went to her preferred news channel, which was showing a scene of—a house she recognized. “Oh my god. That’s Elise’s house. What happened?”

“Apparently Dr. Trallek had permission to remove an important piece of data from his final report,” said Lynne.

“From Elise?”

“No.” The new voice came from her doorway. “From my mother.”

Alison looked up to see Elise leaning against the frame, her body posture and facial expression betraying an exhaustion that went far beyond the physical.

“I’m sorry,” Elise said quietly. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go. My house is under siege. And I can’t face anyone in the family right now.”

Realizing too late that she was staring, Alison lifted a hand and
motioned her in. With a grateful nod, Elise walked straight over to the transparent wall and stood there, looking out to the lights of the city.


“Tuvok talked to Dr. Trallek—who, by the way, sounds like a total self-centered ass—and found out that he met with Melanie during the banquet at the start of last year’s conference. Apparently he was concerned that since the phase variance pretty much dead-ends his research, he wouldn’t get further funding. Melanie told him not to worry about it, that she believed in him. And then she recommended that he not mention the phase variance in his final report, and she’d see to it that his funding was renewed.”

“Why, that little—” Alison stopped, mindful of her audience. “Neither Melanie nor any other member of the board can ‘see to it’ that any particular proposal is approved for funding. That is *my* decision. I take the recommendations of my staff into account, but the final word is mine. She couldn’t deliver on that offer.”

“I don’t think she cared one way or the other, Alison. It wasn’t about funding. It was about getting that report into the pipeline, minus the little detail that using the drive would result in certain death.”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph. I can’t believe it.” A thought occurred to her. “You know, Dr. Trallek had good reason to be worried. We funded him five years ago on a subspace conduit project, and he met with a dead end on that one, too. Failure of a second project probably *would* have meant that we’d pull the plug. He must have looked Melanie up specifically to lobby for a little behind-the-scenes intervention. But why Melanie?”

“You might want to ask Elise that one,” said Lynne delicately.

Alison turned to her guest, who spoke without taking her eyes off the view. “My mother had a one night stand with him at the 2376 conference. I never knew about it until today. So far as I know she didn’t tell anyone.”

*With Trallek?* Alison thought in revulsion. There really was no accounting for taste.

“Did she hire the Cardassians?” She wasn’t sure whether she was asking Elise or Lynne, but it was Lynne who answered.

“She’s not saying. She got herself an extremely expensive lawyer and clammed up. So we’ve solved one problem, but not the big one. Unless
she admits to it and calls off the contract, Kathryn and I still have to live under a rock with twenty-four hour security.”

“Or unless Wiler talks. Or Tuvok finds out who was paying him.”

“Right.” Lynne’s expression told her exactly what she thought of those probabilities. “Melanie hasn’t given Starfleet much help at all. The one thing I’d like to know more than anything else is why, and she’s definitely not answering that question. I wish someone would.”

Her last sentence was clearly aimed at Elise, who turned away and walked slowly to the couch. Alison kept an eye on her as she and Lynne finished up their conversation, ending with Lynne warning that she should expect reporters in the Foundation lobby first thing the following Monday morning.

“This is not going to be good,” Alison agreed soberly. “I’ll have to hammer out an official statement. Thank God it’s Friday—we’ve got two days of breathing space before this hits the press at full speed. But I’ll still have to release a statement tomorrow.” She paused. “I think we’ll need Brian on this one, too. Technically the Foundation is not responsible for the board, but this is still going to have our name all over it.”

“And mine,” Lynne reminded her. “But I’m thinking about changing mine to Janeway. Frankly, that name has a lot more honor right now. And it’s one I can trust.”

Ouch. Alison didn’t dare look at Elise. “Janeway is definitely a good name. But don’t let the actions of one person affect your impression of the whole family. I think there are some Hamiltons you can trust.”

Lynne got the message. “How is Elise doing?”

“Well, she looks pretty shaken up.”

“I can imagine. She must feel like the whole world got pulled out from under her feet. That’s a very lonely place to be.”

The moment they said their goodbyes, Alison deactivated the terminal. She was definitely not taking calls for the rest of the day. Tomorrow would be bad enough.

Before going to Elise, she detoured past the replicator and ordered up two chilled shots of vodka. It couldn’t hold a candle to the Stolichnaya in her kitchen, but it would do in a pinch.

“Here,” she said as she sat next to Elise. “Drink this. I think you need it.”
Silently Elise took the shotglass from her hand, tossed the entire drink back in one swallow, and set the glass on the sidetable. “Thanks.”

“Wow.” Alison had expected her to sip it. “Do you want this one, too?”

“Sure.”

Alison handed over the second glass and watched as it met the same fate as the first. After a pause, she asked carefully, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I wish I had the slightest idea of what to say.” Elise turned her head and met Alison’s eyes for the first time. “I don’t know what happened. They took Mom away and I’ve spent the last three hours at the Detention Center getting stonewalled in every direction, and they never let me talk to her. I can’t think it’s true, but…she never said a word when they took her away. She didn’t even seem surprised.”

“You were with her when she was arrested?”

“No. She was with me. It’s cribbage night. Tonight was my turn to host the party.”

Now this was something Alison would never have expected. “You belong to a cribbage club?”

“Not really. Just a group of us that get together once a month. Mostly Mom’s friends, but I’ve been part of it since I was old enough to play. So I had Mom and a bunch of women at my house, and we were having a great time, and suddenly the door chime rang without any warning from the security grid. You can imagine my surprise to find Captain Janeway there, along with a Starfleet security officer.” She gave a bitter laugh. “My first thought was that something had happened to Lynne. Ironic, isn’t it? And then the officer handed me a warrant and they both just walked in, straight to the parlor, and arrested Mom in front of everyone.” Her composure cracked, and Alison’s heart went out to her as she tried and failed to stop the tears. “Shit, I’m sorry,” she whispered, turning away.

Alison reached out a tentative hand and clasped her shoulder, unsure as to what comfort she could offer. When Elise didn’t respond she awkwardly removed her hand and went to her desk to fetch a kerchief.

“It’s clean,” she said, resuming her seat and offering the kerchief. “I swear I haven’t used it.”

Elise gave her a watery smile as she accepted the kerchief and dried
her cheeks. “Thank you. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to come in here and cry all over you.”

“You’re not, and even if you were, I think it would be understandable. You’ve had a hell of a shock.”

“Shock. That’s a good word.” She folded the kerchief into a tiny square and clutched it in her fist. “I was waiting for Mom to tell Captain Janeway exactly what she thought of such treatment. There should have been fireworks. But it was like she’d been expecting it. She just looked at me and said, ‘I’ll be all right,’ and then walked out with them. I can’t… I don’t… god, Alison, my mother?”

Hurriedly she shook out the kerchief again and blotted the fresh surge of tears. “Fucking Dr. Trallek turned her in,” she said in a sudden burst of anger. “I hope he never publishes another paper as long as he lives. I hope his career goes right down a subspace vacuum. Bastard.”

Alison knew she was risking their budding friendship, but she couldn’t let this stand. “Dr. Trallek’s career may very well be over. The man committed fraud. He deliberately deceived the Foundation, and believe me, I will let that fact be known far and wide when I talk to the press. He is a bastard. But not because he told Commander Tuvok the truth about your mother.”

The look Elise turned on her made her cringe internally, but it quickly morphed into resignation. “I know. You’re right. I just can’t get past it. Lynne said she wished someone would explain why Mom did it, and I know she was talking to me, but I don’t have any explanations. And I’m sure my comm unit is full of messages right now from everyone in the family and every fucking reporter in the Federation, but I have nothing to say to any of them. Nothing.”

Alison watched her for a moment longer and made a decision. “Come on,” she said, rising and holding out a hand. “It’s time to go.”

With a look of dismay, Elise allowed herself to be drawn up. “Okay,” she said a little unsteadily. “I’m sorry. I’ll get out of your hair. You’re probably going to be up all night working on a statement with Uncle Brian anyway.”

“You’re not getting out of my hair,” said Alison, still holding onto her hand. “You’re coming home with me.”

“But I—”

“No buts. Just come with me. Nobody will know where you are, and
my security field will keep out any curiosity seekers. Believe me, it has before. I’ve got a spare room—though the bed could probably use some fresh sheets, it’s been a while since I had company—and you need a place to hide. Leave your hovercraft here. I’ll bring you back in the morning, if you’re ready to come back by then.”

Elise paused, then squeezed her hand. “Thank you. I’ll take you up on that offer. But I hope you have a spare toothbrush, because I didn’t plan for an evening out.”

“I have spare everything.” At Elise’s raised eyebrow, she added, “Well, I try to be a good date.”

By 0400 San Francisco time, Gohat had to accept that his target was not coming to Voyager. He had waited, on edge, the adrenaline coursing through his blood as he listened for the alert. But it never came. His first concern was that the remote alert he had programmed into Voyager’s computer had failed, but a check showed no reason for that to be the case. No, his programming was not at fault. Hamilton had never boarded the ship.

He couldn’t understand it. Voyager’s computer still showed power flowing to the cargo bay, and the presence of Borg components attached to the system. The alcoves were still there, so why wasn’t she? This was the fourth night.

Perhaps the answer might be in the information archives. He turned to his communication console and pulled up the file that was automatically populated with any reference to Lynne Hamilton in the Federation broadcasts.

There were dozens tonight, all trumpeting the same thing: Melanie Hamilton had been arrested and incarcerated at Starfleet for attempted sabotage. He laughed softly. Sabotage? Well, well, well. Apparently Melanie had hired them only because her first attempt hadn’t worked. This explained her urgent efforts to cancel the contract—she must have known that Starfleet was investigating her.

Well, Starfleet now had the scapegoat it would need when he sprang his trap. He felt no sympathy for the woman; if she had been so stupid as to leave evidence of her first attempt, then she deserved her fate.
Moreover, this probably explained Lynne Hamilton’s failure to appear tonight, which meant that she would certainly come tomorrow. That was all right. He could wait.

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**Alison didn’t get** to bed until nearly two in the morning, what with getting Elise settled, discussing strategies with Brian, and working on her official statement. By the time she went to sleep she was in that strange state of being simultaneously exhausted and wired, so it didn’t surprise her at all when she came wide awake again only two hours later.

With a groan, she pushed herself out of bed. No use lying here tossing and turning; there was no way she was getting back to sleep anytime soon. Might as well go have a hot drink and read something to take her mind off the current disaster.

Bundled in her winter robe and fleece slippers, she quietly made her way downstairs, noting as she passed the guest room that the door was cracked open. Interesting. Perhaps Elise was one of those people who couldn’t sleep in a closed room.

By the time she reached the downstairs hallway, however, she knew why that door was open. The light was on in the kitchen; she wasn’t the only one awake.

Elise looked up from the breakfast nook as she came in. “Hi,” she said. “Did I wake you?”

“No. I’m just too wired to sleep. I thought I’d come down for some non-tea.”

“Non-tea?”

“Hot water, honey and lemon,” Alison explained. “My mother used to give it to me whenever I was sick, and somehow it ended up on my list of comfort foods. I have it programmed into the replicator. Would you like a cup?”

“Uh…no offense, but that sounds a little disgusting.” Elise lifted a mug that had been partially hidden by her hands. “I have my own comfort food right here.”

“What’s that?” asked Alison as she input the order to her replicator.

“Hot chocolate, with a very large shot of peppermint schnapps.”
“How large?” Alison carried her cup back to the table and settled in opposite her.

“Well, I can almost taste the chocolate.” Elise smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

Sipping her drink, Alison regarded her guest over the rim of the cup. The exhaustion was even more pronounced now, and there were lines under her eyes that she had never seen before.

“How are you doing?” she asked gently.

“Eh.” Elise waggled her hand in a so-so gesture, but Alison didn’t buy that for a second.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t actually want to know,” she said. “I’m not that polite.”

This time the smile, though faint, was more genuine. “I doubt that. You’re one of the classiest people I know.”

“Thank you.” Warmed out of all proportion by the unexpected compliment, Alison really had no idea how to respond without sounding trite. “I guess if I were truly classy, I’d go away and leave you alone again, since you don’t feel like talking. But I’m too comfortable here.”

“So I might as well talk to you, right?” Elise wasn’t fooled. “It’s not that I don’t feel like it. It’s just…you and I are on opposite sides of this one. Meaning you’re on the right side, and you have been since the whole thing started. I put myself on the wrong side.”

“Where do you get that? You’re not responsible for the choice your mother made.”

“No, but I am responsible for enabling it.” She lifted her cup, taking a thoughtful drink, then put it down and straightened in her chair. “They finally gave Mom access to a comm unit. She called me right after you went to bed. It’s true. It’s all true, everything Dr. Trallek said. She really did put Voyager at risk, and she knew what she was doing. She said when the opportunity fell into her lap the way it did, she just acted on it. I asked her why, and do you know what she said?”

Alison shook her head.

“She said she did it for me.” Elise’s voice was a mere whisper.

“Oh, Elise.” Alison reached for her hand without even thinking about it. “That is not your burden to bear. It’s not. If Melanie had asked you, you’d have said no.”

“But it is. Don’t you see? I’m the one who told her about Lynne in the
first place. Remember how furious Uncle Brian was with me and Charles for not keeping it a secret? He didn’t even tell Aunt Catarina. I thought he was just being overly concerned with protocol, because surely family didn’t count, right?” She made a helpless gesture with her other hand. “Turns out family counts more than anything. This is my fault. Mom could never have made that choice if she hadn’t known about Lynne’s existence in the first place—and if she hadn’t known that we were sending all of our propulsion research to Voyager. Now she’s in prison, and Lynne has been living in fear of her life for months, and none of it would have happened if I hadn’t failed my duty as an officer of the board. Don’t tell me it’s not my burden. It is absolutely my burden. So I’ve been sitting down here, taking a hard look at myself and not much liking what I see.”

Alison didn’t know what to say. Elise was right; she should never have told her mother. But to think she was on the wrong side because of it…

“They say everyone has a dark night of the soul at least once in their lives,” Elise said. “I thought mine was Monday, when you tore me a new asshole in your office and I got a glimpse of myself through your eyes. But you know, that night I went home and thought about it and realized that I could do something about it. I could fix it. That’s why I went to see you the next night, because I was determined to make some changes in my life, and you were the first step. But now—I can’t fix this. It’s already done. My mom is in prison.” She looked down at their hands, still clasped together, and gave Alison’s a gentle squeeze. “I’d like to be the kind of person who deserves this from you,” she added quietly. “But I’m not.”

Alison clamped down as Elise tried to withdraw her hand. “Oh, no you don’t. Listen to me. Yes, you made a mistake. But that doesn’t make you a bad person. You should have been able to trust your own mother. For the love of God, you are not responsible for her actions! You’re responsible for yours. And while you can’t change what’s already happened, you can change what comes next. You want to fix this? Then fix it.”

“How can I?” Elise’s eyes were filling with tears.

“Go to Melanie and ask her to tell the whole truth. You know she hired the assassins.”

Elise jerked her hand out and shook her head. “No. I don’t know that. She told Dr. Trallek to modify that report because it was easy, and it just landed in her lap. Hiring assassins? No. That takes forethought and planning.”

Forward Motion
“Elise...”

“No! My mother is not a murderer!”

Alison backed off. “Okay,” she said, holding her hands up. “But just listen, please. Somebody hired a cell of Cardassian assassins. And the only reason Lynne is alive right now is because she’s tougher than a Klingon targ and she killed three of them the last time they tried a hit. But—”

“She killed three of them?” Elise’s eyes were wide with shock. “She just said they didn’t get away!”

“Well, they didn’t.”

“Fuck! She killed them? Three of them? How?”

“They tried a long-range sniper attack on a ski run. She managed to dodge the phaser fire and take cover, and then she and Kathryn used their own phasers to undercut the snow pack and start an avalanche. The Cardassians were buried. But the important thing is—Elise, forget about that part, listen to me—the important thing is that there were no bodies, just a few pieces of gear. So either they had an automatic beamout, or there are more than three Cardassians in that cell and someone else beamed them out. We’re pretty sure it’s the latter, because of Jefferson Wiler. Remember him? The one Tuvok was trying to track down? He showed you Wiler’s picture.”

“I remember. He’s their Human associate.”

“Right. And two days ago he was arrested near Gretchen Janeway’s farm.”

To her credit, Elise was keeping up despite her dazed look. “So he was still working for them.”

“Yes, he was. Which means the contract on Lynne is still active. Can you imagine what that means for her, and Kathryn, and everyone who loves them? Every day, every hour they live in fear of the next attempt. Now, if Melanie is the one who hired them, then she can fire them too. She can cancel the contract. And she can give Starfleet every bit of information she has on how to find those bastards. But as long as she stays silent and under the protection of her lawyer, Lynne has no protection at all. It will never be over for her. Not until they finally succeed, and she dies.”

Elise stared at her, speechless, and Alison took it just a little further. “I know you don’t want to believe your mother could do this. But the truth is that she’s already shocked you once, hasn’t she? You would never have
believed she could put one hundred and forty-eight lives at risk, but she
did. In a way, hiring assassins is actually a less horrible crime, because at
least they’re only trying to kill one person.”

“Oh, what a lovely way of putting it. But it doesn’t make sense. Mom
did what she did for me, to keep me from losing my position as fund
manager. We’re past that now; I’ve already lost the position. There just
isn’t any reason for the contract to be active. If Mom was responsible for
it, she’d have already cancelled it.”

“No, it doesn’t make sense. But we don’t have all the facts.”

“And you think Mom does.”

“I think that’s a very good possibility, yes.” She picked up her cup and
nursed it, letting Elise process what she’d said.

“If…” Elise hesitated. “If Mom admits to hiring the assassins, they’ll
charge her with conspiracy and attempted murder.”

Alison nodded.

“They don’t have any evidence right now, or they’d have done it
already. So if Mom confesses, she’ll be putting herself away for a long
time.” Elise looked at her in anguish. “How am I supposed to ask her to
condemn herself?”

“If she confesses, and does everything she can to help the investiga-
tion, Starfleet will probably agree to a plea bargain,” said Alison as gently
as she could. “Her lawyer could work that out in advance.”

“God. You make it sound so simple.”

“It’s not simple. Not at all. It’s a fucking mess, but it can still
be fixed.”

“Sure,” said Elise bitterly. “All I have to do is go convince Mom to act
against her best interests.”

“She already did that. Now you can convince her to do the right thing.”

Elise slumped back in her seat and pushed her mug away. “Suddenly
I’m feeling sick to my stomach.”

Alison knew she’d pressed her just as far as she could go. “Hot water
with honey and lemon is good for that,” she said, trying to ease the
tension.

They stared at each other until a tiny, unwilling smile appeared on
Elise’s face. “Thanks.”

“So that means you want some?”

“God, no. I just meant…thanks for being here. For helping me.”
“Did I? I wasn’t sure if I helped or just made things worse for you.”
“You couldn’t possibly make it worse,” said Elise in a wan attempt at humor. “But I’m grateful that you’re trying to make it better.”
“Any time. I mean that.”
They sat in silence for several minutes, as Alison worked her way to the bottom of her cup and Elise appeared deep in thought. Upon finishing her drink, Alison couldn’t see any reason for imposing on her guest’s solitude any longer. Rising, she picked up both cups. “You’re done with this, right?”
Elise looked up, her brow furrowed. “What? Oh. Yes, I’m done. Thank you.”
“Okay. I’m going to recycle these and go back to bed. If you need anything, even just to talk, come knock on my door.”
“I will,” said Elise distantly. She already seemed to be back in whatever world she’d been in.
“All right. Good night.” This time she got no answer at all. She recycled the cups and was on her way out when a soft voice sounded behind her.
“Alison?”
She stopped and turned. “What?”
“Mom said they’re allowing her to have visitors tomorrow. I already made an appointment for one o’clock. Do you think you could fly me there?”
Confused, Alison said, “Well, I could, but wouldn’t it be easier for me to take you back to the Foundation building so you can pick up your own hovercraft?”
Elise looked down at her hands. “No. That’s not what I’m asking. I meant, would you take me to the Detention Center? This is going to be a hard conversation, and I’d…appreciate your company.”
Now she understood. “That sounds like you’ve made a decision.”
Elise nodded, still not looking up, and Alison could only imagine what this choice was costing her.
“Then we’ll leave at twelve-thirty,” she said. “And if you want, we’ll come straight back here afterward. I don’t imagine the reporters have abandoned their campsite outside your house just yet.”
That got Elise’s attention, and when she raised her head, the expres-
sion on her face made Alison wish their relationship was just a little closer. If any woman ever needed a hug, it was this one.

“Thank you. I don't want to impose, but if you're offering, I'll take it. This house feels like sanctuary.”

To hell with it. Alison crossed the kitchen in a few quick steps, leaned down and wrapped her arms around Elise's shoulders. “I'm glad to offer it,” she whispered.

Elise returned the embrace with surprising force, dropping a kiss on Alison's cheek before pulling away. “Good night,” she said.

“Good night, Elise.”
The thick clouds and eerie light of an impending snowstorm seemed perfectly appropriate to the mood inside the hovercraft. Elise had been nearly monosyllabic all morning, and was even less communicative now. She stared straight ahead through the window, and Alison doubted that she was seeing a square meter of the countryside they were passing over. Which was a pity—the scenery was one of the reasons she’d built her house out here.

“I think we should stop by a store before heading back,” she said quietly. “You look great, but you probably don’t want to wear those clothes a third day.”

“Okay.” Elise glanced over. “I meant to ask, why don’t you have a full-range replicator?”

“I never really needed it. A food replicator is enough. Besides, I spend half my life at the office and another third at home. If I didn’t have to get out and buy clothes and basic goods every now and then, I’d probably never go out at all. So, not having a full-range replicator is essentially a strategy to ensure that I don’t turn into a two-dimensional human being.”

“I don’t think you have to worry. Though there’s something to be said for never going out.”

“Hermithood looking good to you right now?”

“Something like that.”
“That would be a waste,” said Alison, and was pleased to note Elise’s
look of surprise. Humming quietly to herself, she piloted the craft
through her favorite mountain pass and began the descent towards
Denver.

Having been alerted to the appointment as soon as it was entered
into the system, Tuvok had come straight to the Detention Center after
beaming down from the Tagus. Once again the ship had performed
perfectly, returning him to Earth with an hour to spare. He’d had time to
speak with Lieutenant Terrill, leave Captain Janeway a message, and
complete his review of Melanie Hamilton’s intake interview. Now he sat
in a control booth, watching a set of monitors as Elise Hamilton was
escorted into the visitor’s room.

“The prisoner will be brought in shortly,” said the guard. “Prolonged
physical contact is not allowed, nor may you give her any object. Since
this is not a legal consultation, the prisoner does not have the right to
privacy. Do you understand?”

“Meaning I don’t have the right to privacy either?” Elise looked around
the room, then straight up into one of the hidden recorders. Tuvok was
impressed that she’d found it so quickly. “Don’t worry,” she said, and he
knew she was speaking directly to him. “I’m well aware that this little
family reunion has witnesses. I’m also aware that you can’t use anything
said here as evidence.”

The guard gestured toward one of the two chairs on either side of the
tiny table. “Please make yourself comfortable.”

“Right.” The single word was laden with sarcasm, but the guard had
no doubt heard that and worse many times before. He nodded and left
the room.

Tuvok watched with interest as Elise prowled the confines of the
small space, her behavior mirroring that of most Humans who were
introduced into a locked room. They nearly always responded with an
inefficient expenditure of energy, as opposed to Vulcans who would
normally react by sitting and going into a meditative state. The principle
held true even for situations such as this, when the individual in ques-
tion knew the confinement was both voluntary and limited in duration.
Intellectual understanding did not seem to affect the behavioral response.

Elise’s head suddenly came up and she looked toward the door, which opened a moment later. “Mom!”

As the guard closed the door again, Melanie Hamilton walked to her daughter and enveloped her in an embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here. Thank you for coming.”

“I’d have been here sooner, but this was the earliest they’d allow me to see you. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Actually I think I’m doing better than you.” Melanie pulled back and cupped Elise’s cheek. “You look like you haven’t slept.”

“That’s because I haven’t. I’ve been worried sick. And shocked.”

“I know. Don’t worry, it’ll be all right.”

As they separated, Elise gave her mother an incredulous look. “How can you say that? It doesn’t look all right to me.”

“Jack is an excellent lawyer,” said Melanie, pulling out a chair while Elise went around to the other side of the table. “And Starfleet doesn’t have much of a case. They’ve collected some circumstantial evidence, and the only direct tie they have to me is a single witness—who, as Jack points out, falls into the category of disgruntled ex-lover.”

“I don’t think I want to hear this.”

Melanie smiled. “Time to be an adult, Elise. Your mother does have an active sex life.”

“Mom!”

“Oh, come on. You think my life ended along with my marital contract? How did I raise such an old-fashioned daughter?”

“I’m not old-fashioned. I just think that certain things fall outside the category of appropriate conversation with one’s mother.”

Melanie gestured at the room. “This isn’t the parlor. Normal categories don’t apply. And if I’m going to trial based on the testimony of Dorsen Trallek, then you’re going to have to get used to the idea of hearing about the reason he knew me well enough to ask for a favor.”

“You mean why he knew you well enough to ask you for help in defrauding the Foundation,” Elise said.

“Wrong line of thinking. I’m glad you’re not my defense lawyer. Jack will make it very clear that while I certainly made a mistake in encouraging Dorsen to submit an incomplete report, I did it as a favor to a past
lover and never had any idea that a simple favor could turn into something so unfortunate.”

The play of emotions on Elise’s face were quite telling, Tuvok thought. Though he had spent many years around Humans, he never understood their self-deception in this area. They could lie easily and fluently about their emotions without ever seeming to realize that their expressions and body language told an entirely different story.

“Where exactly does the truth come in?” she asked.

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. Then again, sometimes a Human had the capacity to surprise him.

“Excuse me?”

“The truth, Mom. Doesn’t it matter?”

“I think what matters is that I get out of here as soon as possible. Not that I’m not enjoying my stay in Hotel Starfleet, but the service leaves something to be desired.”

It was obviously not the answer Elise had expected. “How can you joke about this?” she asked in disbelief.

“Because it’s better than drowning in self-pity! I don’t have time for that.”

“Self-pity—you’re here because you tried to kill a hundred and forty-eight people! Where do you get self-pity out of that?”

“Elise Hamilton, whose side are you on?” Melanie seemed genuinely perplexed. “Do you want me to stay in here?”

“No! What I want is for none of this to have happened. I want to wake up from this nightmare and find my mother on the other end of a video link, asking why it took me so long to answer her call.”

“And I want to be the one calling you. Which is why our defense strategy is so important.”

“But you’re acting like you have nothing to be ashamed of! Aren’t you even sorry?”

“I will never be sorry for acting in your best interests,” said Melanie vehemently. “That is my job.”

“What the—” Elise stopped, her face clearing. “You do know they can’t use anything you say here in court, right? You can speak freely. They have to bring in an interviewer, and you have to sign off on what you’re saying before anything is admissible.”

“Yes, I know that.”
“Then talk to me! I’m not a goddamned jury. Tell me why you did this! You didn’t raise me to value Human lives so cheaply.”

Melanie regarded her daughter in silence, then rested her forearms on the table and leaned toward her. “You live an easy life because of your name. Because of who you are—my daughter. I raised you to safeguard and protect the legacy that I received from my mother, and which I passed on to you, and which I expect you to pass on to your child someday. Stephen doesn’t care about anything but his research, and he’s never shown the slightest interest in the Foundation. But you made up for his lack. You not only protect our legacy, you’ve substantially built on it with your appointment as a Hamilton fund manager. That’s something I was never able to achieve, and I was so proud of you when you earned that. And then you made Vice Chair. You are the hope of the family. You’ve invested well, you’ve made good decisions, and you’ve been a credit to your name. But your legacy was in danger and you didn’t even seem to see it. I had an opportunity to quietly take care of that danger, and I acted. Yes, there would have been collateral damage. But there was no one on that ship as important as you.”

For a Human, Tuvok thought, Melanie appeared to have a remarkable ability to separate emotion from reason. Her logic was very clear. Had she been Romulan, Cardassian or Klingon, that logic and her course of action would have been considered worthy of respect. But in neither the Vulcan nor the Human moral code could it be considered acceptable, and from the expression on Elise’s face, Melanie had not passed her belief system on to her daughter.

“If you had asked me first,” Elise said in a shaking voice, “I would have told you that I would never, ever accept those deaths as defensible. Not for our legacy, not for any title or any amount of money.”

“You have the luxury of taking the moral high road because I did the dirty work. That may fly outside, but it doesn’t fly in here. I don’t expect gratitude, but I at least expect a little support.”

“I can’t support this! Every one of those people on that ship was as important as me! Am I supposed to be grateful that you’re willing to murder in my name?” She sat back, her face crumpling. “Oh, my god, I can’t believe I’m saying this. Mom, please, tell me this is all a mistake. Please.”
The door opened behind Tuvok, and he turned to see Captain Janeway slipping in, still in dress uniform. “I just got the message,” she whispered.

He nodded, turning back to the monitors as the Captain settled into the seat next to him.

“—not a truth I ever wanted you to know,” Melanie was saying. “You’ve always had a rosy view of the world, even though you thought yourself quite jaded. And I have always wanted to protect your innocence. My greatest sorrow now is that you’re sitting here, heartbroken because the facts of life are staring you in the face. Do you think the Hamilton fortune was amassed only through the best, shiniest morals and ethics? Do you think nothing ever happened in back rooms, that no one ever got hurt in the process? True wealth brings great responsibility, and sometimes it also brings hard necessities. It requires realism, and a willingness to act. I acted for your sake, and for the sake of the family. When I said I didn’t expect gratitude, what I meant was that I know you will never really understand why this was necessary. But you are my daughter, and I will always love you, even if you think of me as a villain.”

“Whoa,” whispered Captain Janeway. “She’s either playing the most emotional hardball I’ve ever seen, or she really thinks that way.”

Elise was now slumped in her chair, her face in her hands as her shoulders shook. “I believe she really thinks that way,” Tuvok observed, watching Melanie’s composure as she rose from her own chair and circled around to comfort her daughter. “She shows the behavioral patterns of a parent teaching her child a lesson that, while difficult, must be learned for adult survival.”

Melanie bent over Elise, who turned into her and wept as her mother stroked her hair. “It will be all right,” she murmured. “You’ll see.”

The door opened to admit the guard. “Please take your seat, Ms. Hamilton.”

“Oh, for god’s sake, I hardly think that holding my child constitutes a danger to the Federation,” Melanie snapped.

“Ma’am, please return to your seat,” the guard repeated.

Elise pulled away from her mother, exposing a face red and puffy with weeping. “Go on,” she said. “Don’t get into any more trouble.”

“Would you bring my daughter a box of tissues?” Melanie asked the guard. “I assume you have them in this joyous place. I’d offer her my
kerchief if you hadn’t seen fit to confiscate it. Too dangerous for me to keep, I suppose.”

Elise paused, then dug into the pocket of her blazer and pulled out a white kerchief.

“Ah, good. Never mind.” Melanie dismissed the guard with a wave of her hand.

Elise was staring at the kerchief as if she hadn’t seen it before. Slowly, she brought it to her face and wiped away the signs of her tears as Melanie hovered nearby. Folding the kerchief with great care, Elise looked up and said in a clear voice, “Mom, sit down.”

“You’re all right?”

“No. But that’s not what matters.”

Frowning, Melanie returned to her seat as Elise laid the folded kerchief on the table in front of her.

“I understand that you did what you thought was right,” she said. “You acted according to your own moral compass. But I need you to know that I categorically reject that compass. I do not accept that lives are expendable in the service of the Hamilton fortune. I don’t accept responsibility for your choice, even though you made it in my name. Even though you made it because I enabled it, by telling you about Lynne when I shouldn’t have. I will regret that for the rest of my life, but Alison was right—I should have been able to trust you. The ‘facts of life’ that you think are breaking my heart have nothing to do with the responsibilities and necessities you’re talking about. They have to do with realizing that I can’t trust you. And that you’re capable of actions I find reprehensible.”

“You do not—” Melanie began, but stopped when Elise held up her hand.

“Please let me finish before I lose it completely.” Even saying the words seemed to break her control, but she recovered and went on, “I like Lynne. Do you know she asked after me last night? Even knowing that you tried to kill her, she had enough class to ask how I was doing. If you didn’t see her as a danger and an enemy, you’d probably end up liking her too. She’s got fire—you saw that in the board meeting. And she doesn’t give a shit about the all-important Hamilton fortune, which for me is suddenly a huge mark in her favor. It’s also what makes this so ironic, because I don’t think it would have occurred to her to change her fund
managers if she hadn’t been forced into it. You created the very situation you were trying to avoid.”

“At first she might not have,” said Melanie. “But I had to think in the longer term.”

“The longer—!” Elise clamped her mouth shut, then said, “I love you. I always will. You’re my mother. But if you want my support, as you put it, then you have to stop this. Cancel the contract on Lynne. Work with Starfleet to find those assassins you hired. End this.” She leaned forward. “Do the right thing, Mom. You still have a chance. Jack’s a great lawyer; he can drive a good bargain for you. Please, please take it.”

Melanie shook her head. “I love you too. You know that. But I will not put myself at risk of an even worse charge just to satisfy your version of a moral compass. I’m sorry, but we are not going to agree on this one.”

“Please reconsider.”

“I can’t.”

Elise picked up the kerchief and wiped her eyes again. “Okay,” she whispered. “If that’s your answer, then I don’t have anything more to say.”

“That’s my answer.” For the first time, Melanie appeared distraught as well, but she kept her back straight.

They looked at each other for a long, silent moment before Elise pushed her chair back and stood up. “I have to go.”

Melanie stood as well, and they came together for a final embrace. “You’ll come back?” asked Melanie, in an almost plaintive voice.

“No, Mom. I won’t.” Elise gestured to the guard outside. “Take care of yourself.”

As the guard opened the door, Melanie grabbed her hand and held her back. “We’re not done yet,” she told the guard.

He looked at Elise for confirmation. “Ma’am?”

“Sorry. I guess we need a little more time,” Elise said.

He nodded and backed out, closing the door once more.

“I can’t plea bargain,” said Melanie in a rush. “I cancelled that contract the day Lynne filed her testament. But they won’t confirm and they won’t respond. I even offered to double the payment, but...nothing. I don’t know how to find them, hell, I’m not even sure my messages are getting through. I don’t have anything to offer in a plea, don’t you see? No leverage. Admitting to that charge would be suicidal.”
“So you really did hire them.”
Melanie furrowed her brows. “You just said I did.”
“I hoped I was wrong! God!” Elise took a step backwards. “How did you even know how to contact a bunch of Cardassian assassins? Never mind, I don’t want to know. Fuck.” She put her hands to her forehead and rubbed vigorously. “I still think you should work with Starfleet. You may know things that will help, even if you don’t realize it. Mom, you started this, you have to finish it.” As Melanie began to shake her head, Elise suddenly straightened and said, “You have to. You said you did this for the sake of the family. Well, Lynne is family. She’s my cousin, just the same as Adele, except that she happens to come from a different generation. How would you feel if Uncle Brian decided I was a threat to Adele and hired professionals to kill me?”

From the expression on Melanie’s face, this line of thinking had not occurred to her, nor was it a welcome one.
“That’s what I thought,” said Elise. “Too bad Lynne doesn’t have anyone taking care of her the way you’re taking care of me. Maybe someone else in this family should step into that role.”
“And I suppose you think that should be you.”
Elise paused. “Actually, I do. I think I have some ground to make up, thanks to you. Better find a way to call off those Cardassians, Mom. Because you never know—I might be standing right next to Lynne when they come to take her out.”
“Elise!”
Elise signaled the guard again. “Think about it,” she said, with one last look at her mother. Then she brushed past the guard and was gone.
“Ma’am,” said the guard.
Silently, Melanie preceded him through the door. The monitors now showed nothing but an empty room.
“Well, that answers the question about Elise’s loyalties,” said Captain Janeway.
Tuvok tapped the control panel to end the recording and transfer the file to his PADD. “She was aware that their conversation was being recorded,” he said. “It’s possible that this was for our benefit.”
“Do you really think she’s that good an actress?”
He considered it while putting the PADD in its holder. “No, I do not.”
“Nor do I. She’s truly shattered to find out that her mother did this. In a way, that makes her just as much a victim as Lynne.”

“It is ironic,” he mused. “In the act of protecting her daughter, Melanie has injured her instead.”

“And I think she just started to recognize that now.” Janeway’s expression hardened. “I sincerely hope that eats her alive for as long as she lives.”

“I believe I will give her the rest of today to think about this conversation,” said Tuvok. “Perhaps by early tomorrow morning, this will have ‘eaten her alive’ long enough for her to be amenable to Elise’s suggestion. If we can find out where she was sending her messages, we may be able to follow the electronic trail.”

“I certainly hope so. Lynne can’t live this way much longer. It’s strange, though, that they wouldn’t take Melanie’s offer. Double the money for no work sounds pretty good to me.”

“Not if your motive is personal.”
She looked at him sharply. “Care to explain?”

“When Wiler was picked up near your mother’s farm, I theorized that the contract was now motivated by revenge. It was the only logical conclusion, given Lynne’s testament and the Hamilton board’s awareness of it. My mistake was in assuming that the avenging individual was on that board, and that the act being avenged was the firing of the fund managers. Based on what we’ve just heard, the vengeance is being carried out by a Cardassian.”

“Someone else in the cell,” she said, almost to herself.

“Someone who is avenging the deaths of his or her colleagues,” he concluded. “And for whom the issue is so personal that money is not an incentive to stop.”

Janeway stared at him. “That’s the worst news I’ve heard in days.”

“I would gladly entertain any other explanation that would fit the evidence. But I do not believe there is one.”

She fell silent, but he recognized the signs and waited patiently. The quieter Janeway was, the more rapidly her brain was working.

“Whoever this Cardassian is, he or she has one big weakness,” she said at last. “And we can exploit it if Melanie Hamilton will work with us.”

“You are thinking of setting a trap.”
She nodded. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather meet this bastard on my terms.”

“I concur. What did you have in mind?”

“Just bits and pieces at the moment. I need to think about it. I don’t want to use Lynne as bait, but there may not be an alternative.”

“She would be a willing participant.”

“Too willing. That’s part of the problem.” She rose from her chair. “I want your report as soon as you’ve spoken with Melanie tomorrow morning. And Tuvok...good work.”

“Let’s go.”

Alison looked up from her book to find Elise striding toward the exit without even glancing her way. Hurriedly she closed the book, picked up both coats, and caught up with her friend. “Here,” she said, handing over the black coat.

“Thanks.” Elise pulled it on as she walked, still not making eye contact. But Alison was close enough now to see the signs of recent weeping. It looked as if the visit had not gone well.

They rode the lift in silence, emerging into the base level garage which had grown much colder and darker since they’d parked there. “Brr,” said Alison, zipping her coat up to her chin. “I think the storm is here.”

“That’s appropriate,” said Elise shortly, and did not utter another word until they were in the hovercraft. The moment the doors were shut, she slumped in her seat with a shuddering sigh.

Alison paused with her hand on the controls. “I hesitate to ask, but—are you all right?”

“No. And I don’t want to go to a store for clothes. Please just take me home. Your home,” she clarified.

“Okay.” Alison activated the engines, and a moment later they emerged into the full fury of a Colorado winter storm. “Hang on, it’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

It was just as well that Elise wasn’t up for conversation, since Alison needed her full attention on navigating the city transit corridor. She never much minded piloting a hovercraft in bad weather; it was the other pilots who scared her. Once they cleared the transit corridor and emerged onto
the nearly empty mountain beacon, she breathed a sigh of relief and settled in more comfortably. The scenery that had enthralled her on the way in was now invisible, save occasional glimpses of already-white slopes as the wind briefly blew aside the curtain of snow.

“It’s a good day for hot chocolate,” she observed.

“That’s about all it’s good for.” Elise rested her head on the seatback. “I did my best.”

Alison took the non sequitur in stride. “It sounds like it didn’t work.”

“I don’t know. Maybe Mom’ll think about it and come around. She won’t have much else to do, that’s for sure.” She paused. “Alison, I’m sorry.”

Surprised, Alison glanced over. “For what?”

“I got upset with you last night for saying Mom hired the assassins. But you were right, she did. I just...couldn’t hear it then.”

“You don’t need to apologize. I can’t even imagine how hard this must be.”

“Pretty hard,” Elise whispered. She turned her head to stare out the side window.

Alison’s heart hurt, seeing her like this. She wanted to help, but what could she possibly say? Nothing that wouldn’t sound like platitudes. Elise’s situation was just too far beyond anything she could relate to.

But since she was on the mountain beacon and had a hand free, she gently rested it on Elise’s leg, letting her know that she wasn’t alone. Elise didn’t look around, but after a moment her hand came down on top of Alison’s, lacing their fingers together. They remained that way for the rest of the automated flight.
“Kathryn!” Seven was happily surprised to see her friend on the doorstep. “I thought you were still in San Francisco. How was Johannesburg?”

“Hot,” said Kathryn, stepping in and allowing Seven to shut out the wintry air. “It’s high summer and those people were sweltering in the sun. At least I had some shade on the podium. But between Johannesburg and San Francisco and Denver and here, I’m starting to forget what time my body is supposed to think it is. Or what season.”

“Ship time was easier,” Seven agreed.

“Anyway, I’m off for the weekend. Or what’s left of it. So I thought I’d come over and see how one of my favorite people is doing. Mom says Lynne’s out walking with Revi, and it occurred to me that I haven’t seen you by yourself in about a month of Sundays.”

“That would be approximately thirty weeks, or zero point five eight years. Why do Humans have such a need to exaggerate?”

“Because sometimes it’s more fun than reality.” Kathryn shrugged off her jacket and hung it on a wall peg. “So, I hear you tried your hand at baking Mom’s brownies?”

“Ah. This is why you came over. You’re scavenging.”

“I’m wounded.” Kathryn put her hand to her heart. “Are they done?”

“Yes. But I’m afraid they’re carbonized.”
“You burned them?”

Seven smiled at her look of horror. “No, but I believe I just ‘burned’ you.”

Kathryn threw her head back and laughed. “Yes, you did!” With another chuckle, she added, “Thanks, I needed that today.”

“Were the interviews in Johannesburg that difficult?” asked Seven, leading the way to the kitchen.

“No, those were fine. But the moment I finished, I had a message from Tuvok that Elise Hamilton was coming in for a visit with her mother. So I went straight from Johannesburg back to Denver, and got there just in time to witness a truly harrowing conversation. Melanie Hamilton is a piece of work, and I feel sorry for Elise.”

Seven began cutting out two brownies for each of them. “Elise was not aware of her mother’s activities, then?”

“No. She was…well, let’s just say she was surprised and very dismayed. And I have a feeling she might be calling Lynne soon.” She accepted her plate of brownies and happily bit into one. “Mmm! Seven, they’re fantastic! Revi is a lucky woman. I can’t get Lynne to even try making these.”

“You could try,” Seven pointed out. She thought this was a reasonable solution, but the look Kathryn gave her implied otherwise.

“I do not bake,” Kathryn said firmly.

“Then you are consciously denying yourself a food that you love and crave. That seems counterproductive.”

“Counterproductive would be me attempting to bake.” Kathryn finished her first brownie and eyed the second. “Is there a reason you’re limiting me to two?”

In answer, Seven reached around, picked up the pan of brownies and set it on the counter between them. “I ask only that you leave at least one-quarter of the pan for Revi.”

“That’s reasonable,” Kathryn agreed.

“Of course, should you actually consume three-quarters of the pan, you will need to engage in approximately eight hours of aerobic exercise to burn off the energy for a net result of zero fat storage.”

“Thanks, Seven, you’re a ray of sunshine. Though I do have a sudden craving for a good game of Velocity. I’ve been thinking in circles for the last two hours and getting nowhere. Maybe it will help if I just turned my
brain off for a while. Care to take me on tonight? There’s a sports complex in Bloomington.”

“I—” Seven paused, feeling tugged in two directions. “I would enjoy that. But I shouldn’t leave Revi.”

Kathryn looked up sharply. “Did something happen today?”

“No. But she’s still working through her emotions regarding the link with Dhara. Counselor Troi gave her a significant amount of homework, as she called it. It has not been easy for her.” This was an understatement, but Seven was guarding Revi’s privacy, knowing how vulnerable her partner felt.

“I know it hasn’t. And I feel terrible that I’ve been gone so much just when she needs her friends the most. But Seven, you have to take care of yourself as well as her. That means not locking yourself up in this house just to be with her. It’s okay to get out and have fun once in a while. Revi will understand.”

“She needs me,” Seven insisted. “I’m her partner. That does not mean that I’m her partner only when it’s convenient.”

“That’s not what I meant. And no one could ever accuse you of not supporting Revi.” She frowned slightly. “Have you done anything for fun in the last three days?”

“We have gone for a walk every day, we speak with Gretchen and Lynne, we visit Barney—” Seven stopped as Kathryn shook her head. “What? Have I not understood the question correctly?”

“ Apparently not. I didn’t ask what you and Revi are doing, I asked what you are doing.”

“I haven’t been away from Revi since Dhara’s visit,” said Seven. “Except for now.”

“Then it’s past time to get you out for some fun. I’m a little surprised Counselor Troi didn’t assign that as your homework. A partnership involves two people, not just one. That means both of you need to be healthy. And it’s not healthy for you to consistently subordinate your own needs to Revi’s. Sometimes, yes. But not all the time. She would tell you the exact same thing if you asked.”

It had not occurred to Seven that her choices had been anything other than expected and appropriate for her relationship. Though reluctant to interrupt what she knew was a serious conversation with Lynne, she needed Revi’s input on this new information.
The response was instant. : Absolutely you need to go out and play Velocity with Kathryn! Gods, I never meant for you to think you had to limit yourself just because I’m feeling like a toadstool. You’d better not be in the house when I come back. :

Seven smiled, feeling a sudden lifting of spirits that she hadn’t realized were lower than normal. “Revi said I should get out.”

“Told you.” Kathryn began cutting another brownie. “I’d better stock up on energy so I can whip your ass.”

The moment they walked in the house, Elise said, “I need a shower. Do you mind?”

“No, of course not. But you just took one this morning. How many showers do you take in a day?” Maybe she was one of those people with an obsession for cleanliness.

“Usually one. But I need to wash that place off me.” She seemed anxious and antsy, a clear contrast to her passive silence in the transport. Alison had a feeling that she needed to wash off more than the scent of the Detention Center.

“All right, but if you’re in there for more than half an hour, I’m coming in after you.” It was only partially a joke; she was a little concerned.

Elise gave her a small smile. “At any other time, that might be an incentive to stay. But I promise not to drown myself.”

“Good. Why don’t you leave your clothes outside the door? I’ll recycle them for you.”

“Oh, thank you. That would be wonderful.” Elise was already heading up the stairs.

Alison puttered around until she heard the water come on, then waited another couple of minutes before going upstairs. But there were no clothes in the hallway. She knocked on the bathroom door and called, “Elise? You forgot to leave your clothes out.”

“Sorry! Come on in.”

Opening the door to a blast of heat, she thought, Christ, she’s in there parboiling herself. Then she caught sight of the shadowy figure moving behind the translucent shower panel, and all conscious brain activity came to a screeching halt. The panel was discreet, of course, but it showed
enough to set Alison’s blood pumping at a significantly increased rate. She felt her face growing hot and knew it wasn’t just because of the steam.

Reluctantly, she tore her eyes away from the sight and set about collecting the clothes. They were strewn all over the floor, evidence of their owner’s haste to get them off. As she picked up the silk turtleneck and wool blazer, she imagined Elise wearing them at home, hosting her mother’s friends for cribbage night, laughing and enjoying the evening—until she opened the front door to find her worst nightmare beginning.

“Would you like to borrow something a little more comfortable?” she asked. “I’ve got a sweater that should fit you. Can’t do anything about the pants, though.”

Elise poked her head around the edge of the shower panel. “What? I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

Alison lost her train of thought for the second time in as many minutes. Elise’s hair was slicked back, making her light gray eyes stand out even more than usual. Water was dripping off her chin, a gorgeous wet shoulder and arm were exposed, and she looked like the most desirable woman Alison had ever seen. It took a Herculean effort to locate her vocal cords and repeat her original question, but she thought she pulled it off rather well.

“A sweater sounds great,” Elise answered. She wrinkled her nose at the sight of her remaining clothes on the floor. “Um, sorry about that. I’m usually a little more tidy.”

“Don’t worry about it. You get one freebie.”

Elise gave her a small smile and vanished again, freeing Alison to recover some of her normal mental powers. She picked up the socks, underwear and pants, only to stop dead as a black lace bra was uncovered. Oh, God. She wears lace?

With a last look at the figure behind the panel, she scooped up the bra and fled.

“Barney, I’m home!”

Gretchen looked up from her book and smiled. “That’s a new one,” she called. She could hear Lynne and Revi bumping around the hallway,
hanging up coats and taking off boots before they appeared in the living room doorway.

“Well, I figured he might be tired of being called ‘Honey,’” Lynne explained as she walked straight to the box by Gretchen’s chair. “Hey! How are you doing, little guy?” She lifted the kitten out and sat cross-legged on the floor, putting him on her thigh.

“She’s really gone around the bend, hasn’t she?” Revi asked Gretchen.

“Oh, that kitten has her wrapped around his paw.” Gretchen put her book down and leaned over to see Lynne better. “You know, we do have chairs.”

“Yeah, but look at how teeny he is. What if he fell? Those chairs are high.”

“Like you would ever let him fall. You don’t even let the poor guy get off your leg,” said Revi, crouching down next to her.

Sure enough, Lynne was corraling him with her hands as he tried to jump off her knee. “That’s not true. I’ll let him off, but he has to do it from a little lower down.”

“Give me that kitten.” Revi scooped him off Lynne’s leg and set him on the floor. “Run, Barney, run! Be free!”

“Oh, nice! I haven’t even had him a week and you’re already trying to drive a wedge between us.” Lynne pulled a piece of string from her pocket—she was never without one these days—and drew it past Barney’s nose. His prior interest in the dark space beneath Gretchen’s chair was instantly diverted, and he chased the string up Revi’s leg and right up her torso before she realized what was happening.

“Aagh! Claws!” Revi carefully detached him and held him in her clamp, but he squirmed vigorously, looking around for the string. When Lynne obligingly dangled it in front of him he promptly forgot about being held and focused on capturing it, letting the rest of his body go limp in Revi’s grasp.

“Well, there you go,” said Gretchen. “If the Borg ever want to run a recruitment campaign, they just need to record this little scene and broadcast it. It would make them look positively warm and fuzzy.”

“The Borg would never do anything so inefficient as pouring hours of effort into a helpless fluffball,” said Revi, setting Barney back down on the floor. “That’s the province of tough-talking, soft-hearted Humans.”

“Better than soft-talking, tough-hearted Humans.” Lynne resumed the
game of chase, getting up on her hands and knees and leading Barney all over the living room. “Besides, he’s not so helpless anymore. Look at what a hunter he is now—get it, Barney!”

“Oh, I didn’t think Melanie Hamilton was all that soft-talking,” Revi said. “Not from what I saw at the board meeting.”

“I still can’t believe it,” said Gretchen. They’d discussed this and little else since the previous night, but she hadn’t yet managed to wrap her brain around it. “To kill someone in her own family, for the sake of future wealth—as if they didn’t have enough already!”

“For some people, there’s no such thing as ‘enough’ wealth,” said Revi.

“And I’m clearly not family to her,” Lynne added from the other side of the room. “I actually don’t blame her on that count, since she doesn’t feel like family to me, either. None of them do.”

“I don’t know about the rest, but I liked Elise,” said Gretchen a little wistfully. “She was very charming at the reception. Simply a lovely woman.”

“A lovely woman with a viper for a mother.” Revi shook her head. “Makes me think about mine a little differently.”

“Now that can only be a good thing.” Gretchen reached out and rubbed Revi’s shoulder, earning a warm smile.

“Revi, tell her about your homework.” Despite her protestations about the height of chairs, Lynne was now leading Barney straight up the side of the couch. “This is amazing, Gretchen. She got assigned to look up a word. And I realized that I’ve gone my entire life without ever really knowing what it means.”

“Which word is that?” Gretchen looked at Revi curiously.

“Forgive,” said Revi. “I told Counselor Troi that I wasn’t sure I could ever forgive my mother, and if I couldn’t, then how could we ever move on? And she said that my forgiveness didn’t have the slightest thing to do with Mom. It only has to do with me. Then she told me to go home and look up the word.”

“And it means…”

“To stop feeling angry or resentful toward someone for an offense, flaw or mistake,” said Revi, obviously quoting from memory. “And to stop expecting punishment or restitution. It’s not about what she did or didn’t do. It’s about how I feel. I have control over that. I can choose to stop
carrying around a lot of crap. It doesn’t change the facts of what happened, it just changes how I react to them.”

“And you’ve done that before, so you know it’s possible,” added Lynne.

“How interesting,” said Gretchen. “You’ve just taught me something. I thought forgiveness meant you had to stop blaming the other person for what they’d done, or stop holding them responsible.”

“Nope,” said Revi. “That’s absolution. I didn’t know that until yesterday, either. I’ll never absolve my father, and I’m not really sure I can absolve my mother. But I think that maybe I can forgive her...eventually...because that’s about me, and the gods know I need every advantage I can get.”

“Besides,” said Gretchen carefully, “she’s certainly trying hard on her end.” She didn’t want to push Revi, but this was an opening she couldn’t pass up.

“I know. Counselor Troi pointed out that Mother had a lot of guts to come over here, onto my turf, and do something she had no experience in. I guess I hadn’t fully realized that. I just knew I was never setting foot in that house again, and if she wanted to talk to me, it had to be on my terms.” She looked over at Lynne. “The irony is, I remember tearing Kathryn up one side and down the other for emotionally manipulating you about that Arnett mess. And yet I just did the exact same thing to my mother. I think that regardless of our other issues, I need to go apologize for that.”

Gretchen hadn’t heard about the ‘Arnett mess,’ but now was clearly not the time to ask. She watched as Lynne led Barney back to Revi and up onto her leg, dropping the string and thus ensuring that he would stay put. He immediately settled onto his haunches, holding the string between his front paws and chewing on it while Revi began to stroke him.

“Do you know what I’ve learned recently?” Lynne asked. “I’ve learned that the best prescription for just about anything in the world is kitten therapy. I can pet him and everything else seems to get smaller and more surmountable.”

“There’s something to that,” admitted Revi. “Maybe I should borrow him.”

“And he’s really good at forgiveness,” Lynne continued. “For instance, the first thing you did when you met him was stick a temperature probe
up his ass. And look, there he sits, letting you pet him. He’s not harboring any resentment at all.”

Gretchen laughed almost as much from seeing Revi crack up as she did from Lynne’s comment. “She does have a point.”

“She does,” Revi agreed. “And I can’t argue with the fact that he seems to be totally happy.”

“Sure he is. He understands that reality simply is, so he doesn’t worry about it.”

“The zen philosophy,” said Gretchen. “It is what it is.”

Both Lynne and Revi looked over at her. “That sounded just like Kathryn,” said Lynne as Revi nodded.

Gretchen raised her eyebrows at them. “Well, where do you think she got it?”

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By the time Elise came downstairs, Alison had congratulated herself on recovering her full mental capacities. When she’d delivered the freshly recycled clothes, minus one blazer—which she’d hung in the guest room—and plus one sweater, she had barely even glanced at the sensual figure behind the shower screen. No, it had not affected her at all.

However, the sight of Elise fully dressed and wearing one of her own sweaters promptly undid all of her prior effort. For some reason, seeing Elise in that sweater reactivated the memory of her bare shoulder and arm, and her circulatory system obligingly kicked into overdrive in response.

“Much better,” said Elise, sliding into the chair on the other side of the breakfast nook. “Thanks for the sweater. I’d never have guessed you’d have something with long enough sleeves.”

“You’re not that much taller than me,” said Alison.

“No, but I have monkey arms. That’s one reason I have a full-range replicator, because I can just program in my measurements and get clothes that fit.”

“Well, it looks good on you.” Maybe she shouldn’t have said that.

“Thank you. I bet it looks great on you, too. It’s been something of a revelation, seeing you out of your power clothes.”

Oh, God. She knew Elise hadn’t meant it that way, but her brain was
insisting on bad interpretations. “Are you saying that I lose my aura of power in my fuzzy bathrobe and slippers?”

“Do you want the truth, or a well-meaning lie?”

They laughed together, but Alison needed to make a point. “I always want the truth. Always.”

Elise’s smile slipped. “Will you do me a favor?”

“If I can.”

“Tell me the truth, too. I’ve had enough of lies.”

“I don’t doubt it. And that’s a promise I can easily make.”

Elise nodded, then reached into her pants pocket and pulled out a small square of white. “This is yours, by the way,” she said. “It keeps getting recycled with my clothes.”

Alison didn’t recognize it until it was placed in her hand. “Oh! My kerchief. I forgot all about it. This is very special, you know.” She unfolded it and held it up to show the tiny Starfleet design embroidered in one corner. “A gift from Aunt Alynna.”

“I never noticed that—it’s so cute!” Elise took the kerchief back and looked more closely at the design. “I’ve used this several times, how did I miss it?”

“Probably because you were a bit preoccupied. And please don’t ever tell Aunt Alynna that you think the Starfleet emblem is cute. She might not get over it.” Warmed by the thought of Elise using the kerchief ‘several times,’ she reached out and closed Elise’s hand over it. “Why don’t you keep it?”

Instinctively, Elise drew it closer to her body. “But you said it was special.”

“It is. And I have about two dozen others that are just as special.”

Seeing the puzzled look, she added, “It’s part of a set. A big set.”

“Oh.” A knowing chuckle. “Christmas?”

“From about fifteen years ago. I also have Starfleet logos on pajamas, towels, coffee cups, shotglasses, underwear, a duvet—”

“Underwear?”

“Um, yes.”

With a broad smile, Elise said, “These I have to see.”

“Oh, no. I never show off my Starfleet undies on a first date.”

“By my calculations, our first date was when you threw your pad thai all over me. Our second was when you drank most of my Thai iced tea.
That makes this the third...or the fourth, if you count yesterday separately. So I think I'm qualified to see the Starfleet undies.”

Alison hadn’t expected her verbal bluff to be raised and then called. There was nothing for it now but to play along. “Okay, fine. Come on. But if you consider that first one to be a date, I really can’t think why you keep coming back for more.”

She led her guest up the stairs and to the end of the hallway, where her bedroom took up a full third of the floor. “No comments on how much larger my bedroom is than the guest room, please,” she said as they went through the door.

“Whoa,” said Elise, looking around with a very interested air. “You definitely took advantage of the view. This is the same architectural theme as your living room.”

The wall opposite her bed was mostly transparent aluminum, molded in a peaked shape that reflected the snow-covered mountains framed within the view. Warm-toned wooden beams braced the high ceiling and windows, giving the room the feel of an old-fashioned log cabin.

“I love light,” said Alison. “So I made sure I had plenty of it when I drew up the plans.”

“Wait. You designed this house?”

“Well...I had help. I hired an architect to tell me which of my ideas were good and which would be total disasters. And thank God I did, too.”

“But you got that input after the fact, right? You already had the plans drawn up?”

“Yes.”

“Damn. I’m impressed.”

“I work in theory, Elise. I spend my whole life dealing with intangibles. The tangibles I do deal with—like budgets—are mostly boring. Designing a house was one of the most enjoyable things I’ve ever done. But I think the most enjoyable thing was watching this place being built. You don’t get much more tangible than this.” She spread out her arms.

“No, you don’t.” Elise walked to the windows and put a hand on one of the wooden beams. “So was this your idea or the architect’s? Putting three windows here instead of a single sheet of aluminum?”

“Mine. I have the single-sheet design at my office, and while it works perfectly in that building, I didn’t want it here. I wanted to use the
framing of the windows to carry out the theme of mountain peaks. And I wanted the warmth of the wood.”

“It reminds me of a park lodge.”

“It’s supposed to. I was trying to create a sense of being in a beautiful, remote place.”

Elise turned to face her. “Now I know why this place feels like sanctuary to me. Because you designed it that way.”

“Yes, exactly!” She was delighted at the insight. “Most people don’t get that.”

“Maybe because most people don’t come here needing it.”

They looked at each other for a long moment, and Alison felt something shift between them. They’d engaged in a fair amount of wordplay and teasing during these last few days, but she’d never been sure how much was actually going on beneath it—for Elise or for her. Now it suddenly felt a lot more solid, and she knew she wasn’t the only one making that realization.

“It’s strange,” said Elise, breaking the tension of the moment. “I actually don’t remember noticing anything about your house when we got here yesterday. I just registered that it was spacious and classy, and it seemed perfectly suited to you, but I didn’t take in any details.”

“I’m not surprised. You were shell-shocked.”

“I still am. But you have no idea how much it’s helping just to be here. It’s not just your house. It’s you.”

“Thank you. I think that’s one of the nicest things anyone has said to me.”

“Oh, Alison.” Elise gave her a sad smile. “If that’s true, you need better friends.”

“I’m working on that right now,” said Alison softly.

Another heavy silence fell, and once again it was Elise who broke it.

“So. The Starfleet undies?”

With a snort, Alison went over to her armoire and pulled open the doors, revealing the stack of drawers concealed inside. “I think they’re...” She rummaged through the bottom drawer. “Ah. Here.” She pulled out a pair and turned, nearly crashing into Elise. “Whoa!”

“Sorry.” Elise stepped back. “I just wanted a closer look at this. It’s so old-fashioned, but it works perfectly in this space.” An incredulous smile bloomed on her face as she took in what Alison was holding. “Oh good
lord, I can’t believe it.” Plucking the underwear from Alison’s grasp and holding them up, she began to laugh. “A black starfield! And they had to put the emblem there? It’s like a road sign!”

“No, it would be a road sign if the emblem were upside down.”

Elise dropped her arms and laughed uproariously. “God! I think I may have to program that into my replicator, just so you can have this underwear’s evil twin.”

“I have United Federation of Planets undies, too. You should see how that design frames things.” Alison was thoroughly enjoying the moment.

“Oh, no! I have to see! Come on, show them!” Elise snapped her fingers, still chuckling. “You can’t tell me that without coughing up the proof.”

Alison shrugged, dug them out from the back of her drawer, and silently held them up. Her reward was instant as Elise completely fell apart.

“Aghhh! These are the most hideous things I’ve ever seen!” Elise snatched them away and took a closer look. “And they’re transparent!” That sent her into fresh gales of laughter, and she could barely get the next words out. “My image...of you...has been completely shattered!” She wrapped an arm around her stomach and blindly thrust the underwear in Alison’s direction. “I think I have to wash out my brain now.”

It was impossible not to laugh with her. Alison had never seen her like this, and was delighted that she’d been able to instigate it now. Taking the underwear back, she said with false dignity, “Hey, it’s only the unimportant parts that are transparent. The logo makes these very discreet.”

“Oh yeah, discreet. That was the first word that came to my mind.” With a few final chuckles, Elise straightened and wiped her eyes. “Oh, that felt good. It’s been a while since I laughed so hard I actually cried.”

“Hm.” Alison looked at the underwear, then at her. “Well, I guess I’ll never be able to use these for a seduction again. You’ve ruined them for me. But I’m glad you at least got a laugh out of it.”

“Honey, if you ever attempted a seduction in those, we really have to talk.”

“I’m pretty sure I’d enjoy that,” said Alison, tingling from the inadvertent Honey.

Elise shook her head, still smiling. “You know, I thought you were kidding about the Starfleet underwear. I will never doubt you again.”
“Good.” Alison ostentatiously folded both pairs of undies and tucked them away. “I’ll be most anxious for my tour of your unmentionables.”

“Really. What time would you like that?”

Alison closed her eyes, realizing too late what she’d said, while Elise laughed again. “I know you didn’t mean that the way it sounded, but oh, your face…”

“All right, we’re done here.” Alison shut the armoire. “I’m not saying another word about underwear.”

“Pity.” Elise smiled, but took mercy on her. “So it occurs to me that there’s another floor to this house that I haven’t seen. Can I get the tour, or is this the Colorado version of Thornfield Hall?”

“I promise I have no mad first wives locked in the attic.” Alison gladly led Elise from her bedroom before she could embarrass herself any further. They climbed the stairs to the third floor and emerged into what she’d always thought was the best part of her house: a single space from one end to the other, with transparent panels in the peaked roof allowing so much light to pour in that it felt as if they were standing outside. Large potted plants were grouped all around, giving the room the look of a conservatory, and at the west end her desk and bookshelves stood beneath a twin to the window in her bedroom. Dotted here and there were small shelves, tables and pedestals for the art she had collected over the years, and tucked amid one particularly luxurious grouping of plants were two overstuffed chairs sharing a lamp and side table. It was the perfect place to sit and read.

“Oh, Alison…this is beautiful.” Elise stood still, taking it in. “What a gorgeous space. That’s it, you’re designing my next house.”

“You haven’t seen the most ingenious part yet.” Alison gestured toward their right, where the room was two meters wider than the rest of the space. A food replicator and counter space filled the little nook, and a wide door was set in the wall parallel to the one they’d just come through.

“You have a false space in here,” Elise realized. “What is that, storage?”

“If I had a mad first wife, this is where she’d be.” Alison opened the door and stood back, letting Elise peek in. The storage closet ran the length of the room, and was also lit by transparent roof panels. Box-laden shelving increased the available space even further.
“And I think she’d be happier than she was in Rochester’s attic,” Elise marveled. “You even managed to make a storage closet look inviting.”

“As I said, I love light. There’s nothing worse than going into a space like that and having to turn on an artificial light, even in the middle of the day. Plus the natural light makes it easier to find things.”

They moved into the main room, where Elise asked so many questions about the various objects of art that Alison found herself talking until the afternoon light grew decidedly dimmer. The snowstorm was bringing an early end to the day, and it suddenly seemed like the perfect time for a hot drink. She called up hot chocolate for Elise and a cappuccino for herself, and they carried their drinks over to the armchairs.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” said Elise. “Why is it that you have this gorgeous house, and yet I keep finding you at the Foundation at all hours of the night?”

“You caught me. I wonder that myself sometimes. It’s just that I get so wrapped up at work, and half the time I don’t even realize how late it is. But my weekends are sacred. Unless I have to go to some sort of function for the Foundation, I reserve that time for me. And most of it I spend right here.”

“Do you have guests very often?”

“No, I’m not an entertainer. I do enough of that for work. The last time I had guests was when Lynne, Kathryn, Seven and Revi dropped by to figure out whether I’d betrayed them or not.”

Elise studied her cup. “They were looking in the wrong house.”

“Fortunately, they came to that same conclusion.” She waited for Elise to look up, and when it didn’t happen she asked, “Do you want to talk about it? It’s pretty clear where your mind is.”

“Hasn’t been far from there all afternoon,” Elise admitted. “I feel like I’m living in an alternate reality.”

“Because you just learned your mother isn’t who you thought she was?”

“Yes…and no. She’s still my mom, you know? There were moments in there when she was lecturing me on how the world really works and I felt like I was fifteen years old again, being told that life isn’t fair and I should just ignore the girls at school talking behind my back. It was…surreal. I know what she’s done. But my body doesn’t, and neither does my subconscious. She came over and held me and it was so comforting, God, I needed
it so much…and then I remembered. This person hugging me deliberately tried to kill people. It’s like mental whiplash.”

“T can’t even imagine,” Alison said.

“Before last night I couldn’t have imagined it either.” She sipped her cocoa and asked, “What about you and your mom? Do you have a good relationship?”

“We do. We’re a pretty tight family, probably because we’re so small. I’m an only child, so is my dad, and Mom only has one sister. And Aunt Alynna had no kids of her own, so she practically adopted me every summer when I was growing up. Mom and Dad live in New Zealand, at the base of the Southern Alps. Dad’s an astronomer and Mom raises alpacas. You wouldn’t believe what alpaca wool sells for in places like Betazed and Risa.”

“I probably would.” With a half-smile she added, “Kind of funny to hear you calling the formidable Admiral Necheyev ‘Aunt Alynna.’ That’s a whole different form of mental whiplash.”

“What can I say? She’s been my aunt forever. But she’s also been an admiral forever. From the time I was even old enough to be aware of ranks, she was already a rear admiral.”

“And what is she now?”

“Fleet admiral. As high as you can go and not rule the world.”

Elise snorted. “So one sister is a rancher, and the other holds the highest rank in Starfleet. That must have made for some interesting family discussions.”

“We never lacked for conversational topics. And then throw in astronomy and physics…Dad was a little unhappy that I didn’t follow him into pure astronomy, especially after I showed so much promise by building my own telescope at the age of nine.”

“You were precocious.”

“I loved putting things together. For a while I thought about going into engineering. But then I chose astrophysics, and all was well. Dad’s pretty proud.”

“And your mom? Is she proud of you?”

Alison thought she detected a wistful note in her voice. “She is, but you know, Mom lives in a different world. She’s tied to the land, and the seasons, and whether or not the rains will come at the right time to grow the pastures and keep the alpacas happy. She knows every flower and...
every blade of grass in that entire district. To her mind, Dad and I spend way too much time looking up instead of down.”

“She’d like my brother, then. Stephen’s a botanist. He spends his whole life looking down, and getting excited over things like a flower that has nine petals instead of eight.”

Chuckling, Alison said, “You’re right, Mom would probably love talking to him.”

But Elise had gone a little farther away. “My mom thinks Stephen’s a failure. Because he doesn’t have any interest in the Foundation. She actually told me today that I made up for his lack. And I think…I think that’s part of the reason she did it. Because I’m her one great hope in the family, and she wanted to make sure that I had a clear path to the top of the Foundation.”

“You know you’re not responsible for that, right?”

“Consciously, yes. Subconsciously…” Elise set her mug on the side table and pulled the kerchief out of her pocket. “This saved me today. Mom was telling me she’d done this for me, because I’m too innocent to know how the world really works, and how ruthlessness is necessary to guard fortunes like ours, and how she didn’t expect gratitude but she at least expected my support, and I was just crumbling, Alison. It was killing me. It was like being sucked into a black hole with no hope of ever seeing the light again, because so much of what she said seemed reasonable in a twisted sort of way, and it was my mom. I’ve heard those kinds of lectures so many times before, all the way back to high school when I cried about the girls talking behind my back and she told me they weren’t worth my tears because I was so much better than them. She’s always taught me that I was better. Better than the girls at school, better than Adele, even better than Stephen…and then today she said that no one on board Voyager was as important as me. The same message I’ve heard all my life, taken to a whole new level. And she capped it all off by telling me that she’ll always love me, even if I think she’s a villain.”

“Jesus,” breathed Alison. “I’d have crumbled, too.” This explained a lot about Elise—and made it even more amazing that she’d somehow held on to the core of herself despite a lifetime of training.

Elise shook her head. “No, you wouldn’t. You’re too strong for that. I think it would have bounced off you, because you have a different truth inside. That’s what I find so fascinating about you, ever since the
moment I realized it was there. You are so different from me.” She held up the kerchief. “So I was falling apart, feeling like I’d never get out of the hole, and then Mom asked the guard for tissues and I suddenly remembered that I still had this from the night before. And when I pulled it out of my pocket, it was like you were there. I, ah…I don’t really know how to say this without sounding ridiculous, but it felt like you were holding my hand, like you did last night, and you were calmly telling me not to accept what Mom was saying. Telling me that I knew what was right, and I could still do the right thing. I just felt this…this strength washing over me. And that was when I told Mom that I do not accept her rationalization, or her concept of right and wrong, and that if she wants my support she’s going to have to help undo what she’s done.” With a bitter smile, she added, “As you can imagine, she was a little surprised.”

“Elise, that’s fantastic! Really. That took so much strength.”

“Tell me about it. Thanks for giving it to me.”

“Oh, no no no. I can’t give you what you already have. I just reminded you that it was there.”

With a half-pleased, half-disbelieving look, Elise said, “Well, wherever it came from, it saved me. By the time I left, I felt in control again. And I told Mom that I’m going to help Lynne, because she’s family. I don’t think there’s a better means of showing her what I think of her choices than by helping the very person she was trying to clear out of my way.”

Alison clapped her hands softly. “Brava! I’m in awe.”

“Yes, well, now I have to actually make good on it, which is easier said than done. I’m no closer to an answer now than I was the last time we talked about me contacting Lynne. Actually it’s worse now. What do I say? ‘Hi, Lynne, remember me? The one whose mom tried to kill you?’ She has absolutely no reason to trust me.”

“Sure she does.”

“Oh really? Enlighten me.”

“She trusts me. And I’ll vouch for you. Ergo, she’ll believe you.”

“She might think I have the wool pulled over your eyes.”

“Do you?”

Elise hesitated. “Actually, I think you see me more clearly than anyone, except maybe Stephen. And I’m not sure how that happened in less than a week.”
“If that’s true, it’s only because you’ve allowed it.” Once again Alison felt disarmed. Elise was getting under her skin.

“I’m not sure what I’ve ‘allowed.’ But I do know I want it.”

There it was again, that crackle of tension. Alison knew part of it was no doubt due to the extraordinary circumstances of this weekend, but…that certainly couldn’t be all of it.

“So do I,” she said quietly.

They stared at each other, and Alison thought somewhat irrelevantly that she needed to turn on the lamp soon…and then Elise was rising and looming over her, her hands braced on the arms of the chair.

“Do you want this, too?” she asked in a whisper.

*I shouldn’t. You’re shell-shocked, you’re vulnerable, this is the wrong time, we should wait…*

Alison reached up and curled her hand around the back of Elise’s neck.

“God, yes.”

The smile that curved those lips was possibly the most beautiful one she’d ever seen, and then she lost her focus as Elise leaned down, kissing her with a gentleness she hadn’t expected. It was a slow, luxurious exploration, and she happily took advantage of the fact that while Elise’s hands were occupied with bracing herself, hers were free to roam. With a tactile focus that had suddenly become exquisitely sensitive, she mapped the edge of Elise’s jaw, the length of her throat, the softness of her hair…and then with increasing need, the curves of her body. Frustrated by the bulky sweater, she slipped her hands beneath it and encountered the silk turtle-neck, which was of such a fine weave as to be little different from touching the skin itself.

“Oh,” Elise whispered, breaking off as Alison’s hands found the best curves of all. She rested their foreheads together, breathing hard, her eyes shut.

“Too much?”

“No...” A soft sigh. “Not at all.”

Alison ducked her head and kissed her again, this time with more force. “Not enough?” she asked with a smile.

Elise’s eyes opened and stared into hers with a gaze that, while undeniably aroused, was also just a little unsure. “I don’t know.”

“Okay.” Alison slowed it down, pulling one hand out to caress her cheek. “I won’t do anything you’re not ready for.”
All of Elise’s uncertainty vanished as a wicked twinkle came into her eyes. “Funny, that’s usually my line.”

“I’m not at all surprised. Somehow I suspected you’d be the dominant one in your relationships.”

“Is that what you want?”

Alison watched in awe as Elise turned her head and sucked in one of her fingers without ever breaking eye contact. It was nearly impossible to keep her own eyes open as a warm tongue worked its way up and down her finger, and her body decided instantly that it was ready for anything that might follow—the sooner, the better.

But as aroused as she was, enough of her upper brain was still functioning to recognize something fundamentally off about this scene, and a moment later she knew what it was. Slowly she pulled her finger out of Elise’s mouth, placed both hands on her chest and gently pushed her away.

“What…” Confused, Elise straightened as Alison stood up with her.

Holding both of her hands, Alison stayed close. “Will the real Elise Hamilton please stand up?”

“I don’t understand. Isn’t this what you want?”

*Do you want this, too? Is that what you want? Isn’t this what you want?* Alison had a sudden urge to take this woman in her arms and never let her go. Giving in to the first part of her desire, she embraced her and squeezed hard enough to convey the fact that she was not going anywhere. Then she pulled back and looked into Elise’s eyes, noting the wariness there.

“What I want is you,” she said. “The real you, the one you say I see so clearly. Not the you who picks up women and gives them what they want. And not the you who tries to be the person she thinks she’s supposed to be. I want you.”

The wariness vanished, replaced by a mixture of relief and fear. “What if I don’t know who that person is?”

“Then I’ll gladly help you discover her. I think she’s worth the effort.”

“Alison…” Elise crushed her in an embrace that made it difficult to breathe, but Alison wasn’t complaining. “I’m a little frightened by how much you already mean to me. I don’t want to do anything wrong.”

“Just be truthful. The same promise you asked of me.”

After a long silence, Elise said, “Okay. Then the truth is…I really just want you to hold me for about a week.”
Alison drew back and smiled at her. “What a coincidence. That’s what I want, too.”

“Good game, Kathryn.”
“Thanks. So was yours.”

Seven stood there, sweat-free and annoyingly calm as usual, while Kathryn wiped down her face and tried to figure out how she could glug a bottle of water and gasp for air all at the same time. Damn, she was out of practice. The final game had nearly cost her an internal organ or two, but her sense of competition—plus the fact that she’d had a whole lot of fury and frustration to get out of her system—had put her ahead. Barely.

“Not good enough,” said Seven. “You were physically struggling, more so than usual. I should have won.”

“God, Seven!” Kathryn had to laugh. “You know, sometimes I forget what a thin veneer your tact really is.”

“What tact?” asked Seven innocently.

“Exactly.” Kathryn flicked her with the towel. “I was not ‘struggling.’ I was…” She trailed off in the face of Seven’s expectant stare. “Okay, fine, I’m out of shape. Life’s been just a little busy for the last six weeks.”

“Since the battle at Terellia,” Seven clarified. “You need more recreation time, Kathryn.”

“Wasn’t I just telling you that a couple of hours ago?”

“One point eight hours, and yes, you were. Which does not negate the truth of my statement.” Seven raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps we could solve both of our problems simultaneously?”

“Same time, same place tomorrow?” asked Kathryn with a happy sense of familiarity.

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Great.” Kathryn reached for her bottle, satisfied that by now she could drain it without worrying about breathing. Ahhhh, what a relief.

Not for the first time, she wondered what it must be like to have nanoprobes regulating such body functions as core temperature and perspiration. Lynne didn’t sweat much these days, either. Of course, like the rest of them, she’d hardly had an opportunity to try lately. They had to take care of this Cardassian problem soon—if she was feeling the strain of
not getting out for exercise, then Lynne must be ready to climb the walls. Literally.

They packed up their gear, showered and left, the freezing air a violent shock after the heat of the sports complex. Kathryn was grateful to climb inside the hovercraft and shut out the wind.

“Around here they call that a lazy wind,” she told Seven as the engines spun up. “Too lazy to go around you, so it goes right through you.”

“A colorful but apt phrase,” said Seven. “I like it. Did the Velocity games help?”

Kathryn tried to catch up. “With what?”

“Whatever is bothering you. At the house you said you had been thinking in circles for two hours and getting nowhere. And your play during our games could be characterized as suicidal. Three of those points you won only because you were willing to risk significant injury. Which I am certain Lynne would not be pleased to hear about.”

“And I’m equally certain you won’t see any need to tell her,” Kathryn retorted. “But yes, they helped. I’m not any closer to a solution, but at least I’m less stressed about it.”

“Perhaps if you involved more people, we could come up with a solution more quickly.”

Kathryn gave that some thought. “You know what, Seven? You’re right. I think it’s time for a good old-fashioned staff meeting.”

Half an hour later they had collected Revi, Lynne and Gretchen, and rounded up Seven’s brownies and Gretchen’s cinnamon buns. The ‘staff meeting’ took place in the kitchen, where Kathryn quickly filled everyone in on the latest developments and how she hoped to take advantage of them.

“So, assuming we can get a message to whichever Cardassians are still on this contract, where would we want to draw them, and how could we do it without giving the game away?”

“Do you have any idea how many Cardassians are still involved?” asked Gretchen.

Kathryn looked to Revi, who had been helpful on this topic before.

“Possibly,” said Revi. “Traditionally, Obsidian Order cells were comprised of four or six members. Of course, this isn’t an Obsidian Order cell, it’s a group of mercenary assassins, so there’s no way of knowing if they keep to the tradition. But the moment Jefferson Wiler was picked up,
we knew the contract was still active, which meant that there was at least one other member. Which would be a traditional cell. I think it’s safe to guess we’re looking at either one or three.”

Kathryn nodded. “I doubt there would be more than that, not least because assassinations are not usually a large group activity. So I’m thinking one, but preparing for three.”

“Well, clearly the only way you’re going to draw these people out is to hold me up for bait,” said Lynne. “Like you said, I’m the weakness.”

“True. But there is no way on this green Earth that I’m putting you in any danger.”

“Kathryn, come on. I’m in danger every hour this goes on. So are you if these people know you helped me kill their buddies. It’s a little late to be worrying about that now.”

“The Cardassians know their Human contact was arrested, right?” asked Gretchen.

“Most likely,” said Kathryn.

“Then they’re probably assuming that Lynne knows the contract is still active. So they’d find it believable if she tried to run away. What if you let it slip that she was on a transport to Mars or something like that? That would change the playing field to a ship, which is your territory.”

Kathryn looked at her mother in surprise. “That’s a really good idea.”

“I do come up with them now and again,” said Gretchen modestly.

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Elise and Alison had migrated downstairs to the living room, where they were now soaking up heat from the fireplace as they worked on their second bottle of red wine. Elise was visibly more relaxed, though whether that was from the wine or from clearing the sexual tension, Alison wasn’t sure.

Actually, she mused, the sexual tension hadn’t been cleared so much as simply acknowledged. With the pressure off, Elise had become quite tactile, constantly reaching out to touch her, occasionally leaning in for a slow kiss, once taking it right up to the edge of a make-out session and leaving Alison more than a little aroused. But she always backed off again, and somehow it all felt...comfortable. Which was not a sense Alison normally associated with this phase of a relationship.
“You know, I keep thinking of you as a little girl on an alpaca ranch and I’m finding it completely cute,” said Elise. “That’s just not something I’d ever have associated with you. I’m certain it wasn’t on your CV when we hired you.”

“Right, like that was relevant to the job.”

“CVs are supposed to be inclusive, so that employers can properly evaluate a potential employee.”

“Oh, get out. I’ve hired a hundred times more people than you have. Nobody puts on every single bit of employment history. Even if they did, I’d never have time to read it. Neither would my personnel managers.”

“Yes, but alpacas. I mean, what a great way to make sure you stand out from the crowd.”

“I like to think my excellent qualifications are what made me stand out.”

Elise smiled as she refilled their glasses. “Those and your looks.”

“What?!”

“Well, I can’t speak for the rest of the board—though I’m pretty sure Uncle Brian was immune—but Charles and I definitely noticed. You were by far the best-looking candidate.”

“If you tell me that was actually a factor in my hiring, I’m going to get extremely upset.”

It took Elise a moment to realize she was serious. “No, I was just kidding! Well, not about finding you attractive. But please, give me a little more credit than that. I take my job just as seriously as you do.”

“Okay.” Alison was mollified. Two seconds later she was curious.

“How attractive?”

Elise laughed. “Very. Charles was commenting that Adele would almost certainly vote against you because you were better-looking than her.”

“You know, that is sadly not surprising. Don’t even tell me if he was right, because I don’t want to know.”

“I wouldn’t have anyway.”

“Good.” Alison sipped her wine. “I have never figured out how those two manage to stay together.”

“To be perfectly honest, I’m not sure either. Charles is a genuinely nice guy. And Adele may be my cousin, but that doesn’t mean I don’t see her clearly. She can be a real bitch. And she recognizes the benefits of the
Hamilton fortune a lot more readily than the responsibilities. Somehow Uncle Brian hasn’t managed to pass on his value system to her.”

“Which is precisely why he was grooming you to replace him, and not her.”

“Yeah. And now I never will.” There was a note of sadness in her voice that reached right into Alison’s heart and squeezed it.

“Hey,” she said gently, “never say never.”

Elise’s gaze sharpened. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“Other than Lynne’s priorities? Elise, she worked her ass off to prepare for that board meeting. That is not an exaggeration; I was tutoring her for two solid days and it was like doing a data dump. She was working before I got there in the morning and I’m pretty sure she didn’t stop after I left in the evening. And she didn’t do that because she had a burning desire to sweep through the Foundation and topple heads in a coup. She did it for two reasons: one, she feels an incredible responsibility to her parents’ legacy, and two, she was furious about the assassination attempts.”

“Fuck, I knew it.” Elise put a hand to her forehead.

“The thing is, I learned a lot about her in those two days. I underestimated her—badly. She’s sharp as a tack and she doesn’t care about a lot of the things most people think are important. She sure as hell doesn’t care about wealth or power. She doesn’t want the Chair position because of the title. She wants it because she knows that’s what her parents would have wanted. But she’s not a corporate shark, she’s a mountain climber. And she’s married to a career Starfleet officer who may or may not be shipping out again. I’m not trying to give you false hope. I’m just trying to tell you that you and she have very different approaches to your places on the board, and your lives are very different. It’s possible that once she settles in and figures out who she can trust, she may not want the full responsibilities that she’s signed up for. Especially if she knows she has someone on hand that she could entrust them to.”

Elise was watching her intently, absorbing every word. “So if I do what I’m planning to do anyway, there’s a chance I could turn around some of the mess my mom made? You know, the more I hear from you about Lynne, the more I realize how much unnecessary damage Mom did.”

“A lot,” agreed Alison.

“God. I have to call her.”
“Now is as good a time as any. That bottle of wine you’ve got sloshing around inside you should make it a little easier.”

“Right. Now if only that bottle of wine could tell me just how the hell I can possibly open that conversation.”

“Will it help if I open it for you? And sit next to you?”

She barely had time to react before a pair of very soft lips closed on hers, then nibbled their way down her throat before stopping at the collar of her sweater. Elise raised her head and gave her a grateful smile.

“That would help a lot,” she whispered.

“Great,” said Alison, her voice catching. “Now I just have to recover my language skills.”

Night had fallen long before the strategy session finished, and Kathryn still wasn’t done. They had a good plan outlined, but she needed additional resources. It wasn’t like being on Voyager, when everything and everyone on the ship was always right at hand. Now there were calls to be made, favors to be asked, requisitions to be completed. And of course, most of those calls ended up being at least partially social. But this last one had taken care of a major piece to the puzzle, and she only had one left to do. She just hoped that Tuvok would be able to gain Melanie’s cooperation tomorrow, or they’d have to go back to the drawing board and figure out another way to subtly leak the information.

The terminal beeped just as she was reaching for it, indicating another incoming call. She checked the caller’s FedComm ID and smiled in recognition.

“Hello, Alison! It’s good to see you. Have you recovered from your last shift as Lynne’s handler?”

“Nobody ‘handles’ Lynne, Kathryn. And if you manage it then I probably don’t want to hear about it.”

“I manage it about once a year. The rest of the time it’s the other way around. I’m guessing you want to speak with her?”

“I do, but first—congratulations on the amnesty!”

“Shouldn’t I be saying that to you?”

“I was just a bystander during the negotiations. But really—I know that means a hell of a lot to you. It must feel great.”
“It will feel wonderful, if the Council follows through this week.” Kathryn wasn’t going to celebrate until there was a reason. She’d had too many disappointments in the Delta Quadrant to ever get ahead of herself.

“They will,” stated Alison with certainty. “At this point it would be politically stupid not to. And though the Council can be stupid about a lot of things, it’s usually not when it comes to politics.”

“You’ve got a point. I’m having to remind myself how all this works. Politics in the Delta Quadrant were normally much simpler: whoever had the biggest weapons got to set the agenda.”

“So what happened when you didn’t have the biggest ones?”

“Then I either gave them a lesson in strategy, negotiated my way out, or ran like hell.”

Alison laughed. “I’m betting the last one didn’t happen often.”

“Kathryn?”

She turned, finding Lynne poking her head in the study door and making coffee drinking motions with her hands. “Hi, sweetheart. No, I don’t need coffee yet, but thanks. Hey, Alison’s here for you.”

“Oh!” Lynne came in and walked around the desk. “Hi, Alison. What’s up?”

“A lot, actually. I have someone here who really wants to talk to you, but doesn’t know how.”

Kathryn knew instantly that it would be Elise. But from Alison’s house?

“Okaaaay,” said Lynne. “Well, usually you start by saying hello. Who is this person?”

Alison gestured off-screen and scooted to one side. A long moment later, Elise Hamilton appeared in the frame. “Hello, Lynne,” she said.

“Hi, Elise.” Lynne’s voice was friendly, which clearly surprised the other woman. “Hey—I’m sorry about your mother. This whole thing has been a total clusterfuck, for all sorts of people, and I’m truly sorry that you’ve been dragged into it too.”

“You can’t—” Elise was stunned. “You’re apologizing to me?”

To the side, Kathryn saw Alison smile and shake her head slightly.

“I’m just telling you that none of us deserved this mess. And I’m sad that your world got ripped out from under your feet. I know a little bit about how that feels.”
Elise gave a surprised laugh that held no humor at all. “God! I’ve spent the last twenty-four hours trying to figure out how to apologize to you.”

“What for?”

Now Alison was pressing her lips together, and Kathryn had to stifle a smile as well. Lynne was doing a number on poor Elise, though it wasn’t intentional.

“For…for my mother, of course. I can’t even begin to tell you how terrible I feel about what she’s done.”

“Elise,” said Lynne calmly, “so far as I can remember, the only apology you owe is to Alison for the way you treated her at the board meeting. Now, since you’re calling from her house, maybe you’ve already taken care of that.”

“She has,” said Alison. “We’re good.”

“Okay. Then I don’t see why you think you owe me anything. You are in no way responsible for your mother’s actions. Actually, I suspect she’s hurt you more than she has me.”

“It’s been…tough,” Elise admitted. “But I think you’re letting me off way too easily. I’m the one who told her about you. It’s true that I didn’t make her choices, but I did enable them. And I regret that more than I can say.”

Lynne inclined her head. “Then I accept your apology. I know you didn’t do it with malicious intent, and that’s really all that matters.”

“So…that’s it? It’s that easy?”

Alison put her arm around Elise’s shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. “Looks like it,” she said.

Kathryn watched in considerable surprise. How long had these two been an item?

“Yeah, it is. I guess I could make it harder if you really wanted me to,” said Lynne. “But you’ll have to give me some time to think about it.”

“No, no, that’s all right. Don’t go to any trouble. Listen, Lynne—I actually owe you a different apology. And this one really is mine. I’ve known about you for more than a year, but until a few days ago I never realized, consciously, that you’re family. Alison’s been helping you all this time and she isn’t even related. I’m your cousin and I haven’t done shit. Alison kindly pointed that out to me a few days ago—” Alison was smiling and shaking her head again — “and so I did a little research. It looks like I’m descended from your aunt, Hayley Jill Hamilton. She had a
daughter, Teresa Janine, who had a son named Richard Hamilton Monroe. Does that sound familiar?"

When Lynne didn’t respond, Kathryn turned to see her staring at the screen. “Lynne?”

“Holy shit,” Lynne said at last. “I just learned about Teresa’s little boy on Wednesday. He was born three years after I was taken off Earth. You’re descended from Aunt Hayley?”

“It looks like it. Some of the records were lost in the Third World War, so I can’t be certain, but…I think so.”

“But why are you a Hamilton if you’re descended from a Monroe?”

“I’m not sure, but I can take a guess. The records show that when Richard got married, he reversed his two last names and became Richard Monroe Hamilton. I’m guessing that the Foundation was already a pretty big enterprise by then. Maybe he worked for it—your parents didn’t have a direct heir, after all. And maybe he wanted the power of the name. I can tell you that a lot of my more recent family have jumped through a few hoops to make sure they became or stayed Hamiltons.”


“I am. About eleven times removed.”

Seeing that Lynne really was speechless, Kathryn wrapped an arm around her waist and said, “Elise, we’re glad you called. We’re working on a way to eliminate this Cardassian threat once and for all, but we still need one more piece of the puzzle. I’m wondering if you’d be willing to help.”

“Are you kidding? I’d jump at the chance! What do you need?”

“A message.”
Dhara lifted the water container from the replicator and carried it to the living room, where she watered her ficus tree first. The tree had grown enough that it had pushed the soil nearly to the rim of its pot, so she always had to water carefully or risk an overflow. She dribbled the water on, watched it slowly soak in, and dribbled more. Then she noticed a few yellowed leaves and set about removing them.

Her life was focused on the details these days. She needed to keep things simple. In the four days since her link with Revi, she had cleaned the house from top to bottom, rearranged two kitchen cupboards that hadn’t changed in twenty years, and even attempted to tidy up the storage closet in the study. But that had led to her discovery of old photographs and schoolwork from Revi’s childhood, and she’d hurriedly pushed the whole pile back in the closet.

It had taken her two days to work up the courage to approach Nishad. The conversation had been sadly predictable for the most part: he had exploded with anger upon learning what she’d done, and used that anger as a shield against any attempts she’d made to explain why his prejudice against mental sharing was unfounded. He had utterly rejected the idea that he might have any responsibility for Revi’s absence from their lives, asserting that it was Revi’s duty to make the effort to visit and most certainly not the other way around. In the face of his
vehement opposition, she had nearly abandoned her intent to ask him the one question that was burning a hole in her heart. But then the image had flashed through her mind—a memory that was not hers, but that she would never, ever be able to forget—and she had asked him anyway.

His anger had turned to a shocked silence. After far too long a time, he’d finally said, “I did nothing wrong. I don’t have to defend myself against such ridiculous accusations.”

Trembling with a combination of fear and desperation, she’d said, “If you weren’t doing anything wrong, then why did you always shut her bedroom door? What was it that I wasn’t supposed to see?”

Normally the strength of his glare would have had her backing down, trying to restore the calm in their house by pacifying him. But this time, with Revi’s memories still vivid in her mind, she did not give in. At last he had turned and, without a word, walked into the study and shut the door.

They had not spoken to each other since.

As she picked off the last yellow leaf, the sound of an incoming call chimed through the house. It was probably Alma, calling to see why she hadn’t shown up at their usual Sunday morning neighborhood coffee meeting. With a sigh, she collected the leaves from the floor and carried them into the kitchen. She’d just tell Alma that she was feeling a little under the weather. It wasn’t even that much of a lie.

Tossing the leaves into the waste recycler, she turned to the wall terminal and stopped, shocked, at the name on the FedComm ID. Quickly she hurried back to the kitchen entrance and closed the door. The six steps back to the terminal seemed like half a kilometer, and when she raised her hand to accept the call, it was visibly shaking.

“Hello, Mother.”

For a moment she couldn’t even speak. Just seeing her daughter on the screen, calling of her own volition, had already exceeded her ability to handle anything more emotionally complex than watering plants. Revi seemed to sense it, because she offered a weak smile and said, “I’m guessing you didn’t expect me to call.”

“That would be a good guess,” Dhara managed. “How are you?”

“Better. You?”

“Not so good,” said Dhara truthfully. She just didn’t have the strength to prevaricate.
“I’m sorry about that. I really…nevermind. I’d like to see you again. There are some things I need to tell you.”

“Okay.” She was already dreading whatever it was that Revi still needed to say, but if there was one thing she’d come to realize since their last encounter, it was that she owed it to her daughter to listen. No matter how much it hurt.

Revi seemed to be waiting for her to say something else. “Uh, good,” she said after an awkward pause. “Well, I’m at a little coffee shop called Fog Rise, and—”

“You’re here?” asked Dhara, an electric pulse surging through her body. “In San Francisco?”

“Yes. Please don’t tell Father. I only came to see you.”

“I won’t.” *She came to see me? “When do you want me to meet you?”*

“Whenever you can. Now would be great, but if you’re busy, I can find things to do. We could meet for lunch, maybe, or—”

“No, no, I’ll come now. I know where you are. Give me fifteen minutes.”

“All right. I’ll be here.”

After signing off, Dhara rushed around the house, alternately panicking at the thought of seeing Revi and feeling joyful that she’d actually come. That was a good sign, right? It had to be.

She didn’t bother telling Nishad that she was leaving the house. He probably wouldn’t have responded anyway, but the last thing she needed was any sort of question from him. Still, it felt strange to be walking out the door without at least poking her head into the study and saying she’d see him later. She’d never realized how comforting all of those tiny little routines were, and how empty and edgy their relationship seemed without them.

A brisk ten-minute walk brought her to Fog Rise, where she found Revi sitting at a corner table by the front window, watching for her. Her daughter’s hand was already raised in acknowledgement when their eyes met, and Dhara went through the door feeling deeply unsettled. She’d hoped to see Revi first. It would have given her a few precious seconds to adapt to the shock of seeing her again.

“Thanks for coming,” Revi said as she sat down. “Do you want anything?”

“What are you having?”
“Chai tea. They seem to know how to make it right in this place.”

“That sounds good to me.” Dhara wasn’t up to the task of choosing something off the extensive drinks menu.

She had a reprieve while Revi called a waiter over and placed her order, but it ended all too soon. Revi was watching her with an inscrutable gaze, and she had no idea what was going on behind those eyes. For the first time since their link, she almost wished she could be back in it again.

“I’ve been doing a lot of thinking,” Revi said finally. “And I realized that I’ve behaved pretty badly. I put you in a very difficult position, and left you high and dry once you were there. I want to apologize for practically forcing you into that link, and for not taking better care of you when you were in it. I wouldn’t have done that to a patient of mine, and I shouldn’t have done it to you.”

That was a surprise. “How could you have taken better care of me? You didn’t hurt me, the truth did. And wasn’t the whole point of that to tell each other the truth?”

“Well, yes. But I lost control. There’s telling the truth, and then there’s bashing someone over the head with it.”

“It did feel a bit like that,” Dhara admitted. “But you know what? I’d rather have that than all those years of silence. I’m not even talking about the years you were gone. I’m talking about when you simply stopped coming home. Even if it hurts, I’d rather have you here, connecting with me.”


“That I look awful,” Dhara said. “Don’t worry, it’s the truth. I feel that way, too. It’s been a little tough, realizing that everything I thought was real—wasn’t.”

Revi looked past her, and a moment later the waiter set her drink down. She thanked him and tasted it, finding it hot and not too sweet.

“You’re right,” she said. “They know how to make it here.”

There was an awkward silence as they both sipped their drinks. At last Revi said, “I’m sorry it’s been so difficult for you.”

She looked at her daughter’s lovely face and winced as the memory sliced across her mind once again. That same face, so many years ago, staring into a mirror with an expression far, far older than should have been possible. Even the memories of the beatings hadn’t hurt her the way
this one did. Perhaps because Revi’s memories of the beatings were more visceral, and the images never included her own face. But the memory of the mirror—that was the one that showed the true damage.

“It’s been difficult for me for exactly four days,” she said. “But you’ve been dealing with this all your life.”

Revi nodded. “Thank you for acknowledging that.”

“Revi…I need to say this again, because I know you didn’t really hear me the first time. If I had been able to believe that your father was capable of that, I would never have let it happen. I swear to you, I never, ever meant to abandon you.” The tears rose to her eyes so quickly that she didn’t even have time to blink. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, fumbling for her napkin.

With her head down as she blotted her eyes, she never saw the hand until it was covering her own. The gesture undid her, and she squeezed Revi’s hand convulsively as she tried to keep up with the tears. “I keep seeing you,” she said, not daring to look up. “Looking in the mirror after—it happened. You must have been about fourteen years old, but your face, it looked...you looked like an adult. A weary woman who’d seen too much. That memory haunts me.” She raised her head then, seeing Revi watching intently. “I would give anything—anything—to take that expression off your face. To go back in time and save that little girl. I failed her, and that...oh, Revi, that hurts me so much more than anything else.”

Though Revi said nothing, she had to wipe her own eyes, and Dhara was startled at the sight of the clamp. “You’re not wearing your glove,” she said.

Revi looked at the clamp, shrugged, and lifted her cup of tea with it. “You’ve seen it now,” she said. “I only wore the glove to keep from upsetting you and Father any more than I was going to anyway. It’s a pain in the ass. Kind of like wearing mittens—your fingers are in there but you can’t use them for anything.”

Dhara nodded, fascinated by the sight of her using the clamp so adroitly.

“I wish you could go back in time, too,” Revi said. “I can’t even imagine how different things would have been if I’d felt like I had an ally in that house.”

“You always had an ally.”
Revi drew her hand back. “You’re a peacemaker, Mother. You were always more interested in keeping the peace with Father than speaking up for me.”

Her hand felt cold, and she curled it around her teacup. “I’m not keeping the peace now. Your father and I haven’t spoken for two days.”

That shocked her, she could see. “You told him?”

“I told him everything. I told him what we did, and when he finished blowing up over that, I told him what I knew.”

“Gods, Mother. What did he say?”

“He denied it.”

“Of course.” Revi closed down instantly.

“And I called him on it.”

“You did?”

“I asked him why he always shut your door if he hadn’t been doing anything wrong. He wouldn’t answer. I think he couldn’t answer. And we haven’t said a word to each other since.”

“Holy shit,” Revi said quietly. “I wish I’d been there to see that.”

“There wasn’t much to see. And I really don’t know what to do now. Will he ever admit the truth? How long do I wait? What do I do if he does admit it? I’ve been walking around my house in a daze, and the only things I can handle are simple little chores. That place has never been so clean. I missed my coffee with the ladies this morning, because I couldn’t face them. I’m pretty sure their spouses are still exactly who they’re supposed to be. But mine isn’t.”

Revi was looking at her with an odd expression on her face. “Well, hell,” she said, almost to herself. “Doctors’ wives die young.”

“What?”

“Something Lynne said. A quotation from her time, about how we don’t take care of those closest to us. Cobblers’ wives go barefoot, and doctors’ wives die young.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I’m a doctor. It should have occurred to me that the aftermath of this would be hard for you. But I just…didn’t think about it.”

“You didn’t think about it? When I sat there in your living room and asked you not to walk away from me, because I didn’t know how to deal with everything you’d just shown me?”

“I was a little upset, Mother.”
“So was I!”

Revi lifted her hand in a mollifying gesture. “Okay. I know. I’m sorry, I’ve handled this badly from start to finish. I guess Counselor Troi was right.”

“Who is that?”

“The counselor that I’m seeing right now. She’s the one who reminded me that what you did in that link took a lot of courage, because you had zero experience in it, and in that moment I was essentially responsible for you. And she also told me that I’m a little behind the times in dealing with this. I never have until now. Which means that while I’m using the intellect of an adult, my emotional responses are…a little less mature.”

Suddenly Dhara understood. “You’re still that girl in the mirror.”

With a grimace, Revi said, “Something like that.” She reached for her cup.

“Then maybe I can still save her.”

Revi paused with the cup halfway to her mouth, looking at her in surprise. “That’s an interesting way of putting it.”

“If you’re just now dealing with it, well…I am, too. In a way we’re at the same stage. Revi…I need to ask you something.” It had been hurting her for days now, yet she hadn’t thought she could ever come right out and ask. But after asking Nishad the hardest question she’d ever uttered in her lifetime, somehow this one didn’t seem quite so difficult.

“Go ahead.”

Not that it still wasn’t hard. She took a deep breath, let it out—and then had to take another one.

“Mother, just ask me. Don’t start hyperventilating.”

“Okay. Please don’t be angry with me.”

“I can’t promise that. But I can promise that if I do get angry, I’ll handle it better than I did last time.”

That wasn’t very encouraging. But she’d gotten this far, so…

“I know that you feel abandoned, and that I never protected you. Well, I didn’t. But you never gave me the chance. I keep thinking about it, and I have to ask you—” She took another breath, her throat already tightening in anticipation. “Why didn’t you ever tell me? You healed your own wounds and hid them from me. Don’t you know I’d have acted if I’d seen them?”

Revi didn’t get angry. She didn’t seem to react at all, other than
breaking their eye contact and studying her tea. “I’m not sure,” she said finally. “I think I was just waiting for you to rescue me. If I had to ask for it, then… it wouldn’t be a rescue. Shit, I’m not explaining this very well.”

“Maybe we need an interlink,” Dhara joked weakly.

“Maybe.” Revi took her seriously. “Maybe my mistake was initiating that link too soon. We should have talked about it before, gotten some of the hard stuff out of the way earlier. But then, I don’t think you’d have believed me.” Before Dhara could respond, she added, “I always assumed you knew. I didn’t see how you couldn’t know. So if you weren’t coming in to rescue me, then it meant that you either agreed with what Father was doing, or you just didn’t care. Either way, I wasn’t going to let you see how much it mattered to me. I wouldn’t let you or Father see that I was hurt. He could beat me, but he couldn’t break me.”

“Oh, gods above and below us.” She hadn’t thought it was possible to hurt any more than she already had been, but she’d clearly been mistaken. This was simply unbearable. “So much pain, for both of us, because of the assumptions of a child. Revi, please, please believe me—if you had come to me and shown me those wounds, I would have done what I did two days ago. I’d have asked Nishad about it. I know, it’s fine for me to say it now. But it’s true, I swear it.”

“I don’t know if I can believe you.” Revi’s voice was raw. “You fought me even in an interlink. The only reason you finally gave in and believed me was because you couldn’t deny my memories.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to deny the marks on your body, either!” Dhara put her face in her hands. Gods, she was so tired. She just wanted to lie down and sleep, and let all of this slip away for a few precious hours. It hurt too much, and it was never going to end.

After a very long silence, she heard Revi sigh. “Maybe you would have believed me,” she said. “In which case I’m partly responsible for all of this, too.”

“Oh, no.” That brought her head up. “Don’t you even start. It was never your responsibility. You were a child. I’m not trying to shove off my own culpability onto you. I just…I just wish you’d said something. Given me the chance to help you. I feel so helpless now; it’s too late and the damage has been done and there’s nothing I can do, and it’s so hard.” She finished in a whisper, feeling guilty about saying even that much, because
if there was one thing she was sure of, it was that Revi’s pain far outstripped her own.

Revi shook her head. “You’re wrong about that.”

“You’re wrong about what?”

“There is something you can do. And you’ve already done it. You asked Father. You put him on the spot and you forced him to face it, and he walked away and hasn’t talked to you for two days because of it. You have no idea what it means to me that you did that. It feels good, Mother. You stood up for me.”

A tiny ray of light entered her soul. “You’re my daughter.” This, at least, was a reality that did not change.

And though Revi’s answering smile was small, it was enough to break her heart.
Gohat was not in a good mood. The entire night had passed without any sign of Lynne Hamilton coming aboard Voyager. His nerves were jangling from two nights in a row of sitting, tensed over his operations panel, waiting for the magic moment that never came. Something was wrong and he didn’t know what it was, and his inability to find out was frustrating him to no end.

The Borg alcoves were still on Voyager. He’d double-checked and there was no doubt that Borg components were still sucking power in the cargo bay. Moreover, his continual planet-wide scans for Borg energy signatures still came up empty. Whatever method Hamilton and her two machine friends had found for hiding their true nature, it was still working and they were still suspicious enough to keep using it.

He’d read and watched every bit of news collected by his filtering program, and though there was significant coverage of Melanie Hamilton’s arrest, Lynne Hamilton’s name was never mentioned except as the target of Melanie’s attempted sabotage. Not a single clue could he find, no matter how carefully he looked. He was almost frustrated enough to just beam down to Janeway’s next public appearance and take her hostage, except for the fact that Starfleet was undoubtedly on the highest security alert regarding her, and his Cardassian life signs would have alarms ringing all over the planet as soon as he materialized. If his partners
hadn’t been killed, they could have conducted an organized raid and grabbed the captain anyway—but then, if they hadn’t been killed, he wouldn’t be forced to even think about using a hostage as bait for his real target. It was untidy and completely beneath him, but he might actually have to consider it if he couldn’t find another way.

The beep of his communication panel sounded loud in the small ship, and he jerked upright in surprise. With both Wiler and Melanie Hamilton in prison, he couldn’t imagine who would be contacting him.

Unless it was Starfleet. If that bitch had made a bargain with Starfleet, he could be in trouble. Messages to the ship were bounced off a dozen relays, but that didn’t mean that a highly skilled professional couldn’t eventually track down the final destination. But Starfleet would hardly be warning him in advance if they were on his tail.

With a stop to make sure his engines were ready to take him out on a moment’s notice, he went to the panel, checked the FedComm ID, and had his second surprise of the day. Elise Hamilton? Was the daughter taking over the mother’s work?

He activated the message, staring in fascination at the woman who was so clearly her mother’s daughter. Same eyes, same nose…same display of total assurance.

“My name is Elise Hamilton,” the woman said coolly, staring straight out of the terminal. “My mother gave me this code, and before I say anything else, let me assure you that she did not give it to Starfleet. They have no evidence connecting her to this contract, so she’s not about to hand them what they need to charge her. They don’t have much evidence on the sabotage charge, either, and I think she’ll be out just as soon as our lawyer finishes dealing with all the crap Starfleet is throwing up in front of us.

“But the damage is already done. Our name will never recover from this. And I will never recover from the fact that after more than a decade of good work, I’ve been publicly fired from my job as Hamilton fund manager, and demoted on the Foundation’s board of directors. My mom is in prison and I’m out of a job, an income and the respect I’ve worked for all my life, all because of Lynne Hamilton.” Her expression hardened.

“You and I have a common enemy. I don’t know how many of you are left, but I do know that you’re three fewer than you once were. Yes, I’ve seen Starfleet’s evidence. I also know that Mom tried to cancel this contract,
but that was before they arrested her. She’s asked me to help you finish the job. I hope you’re up to it. Lynne Hamilton has already defeated you twice. Don’t let it happen a third time.”

He was so furious with the woman’s arrogant disrespect that he almost didn’t hear her next words. But when the sound of rushing blood cleared from his ears, he sat up straight and watched her closely.

“I have a few more connections than you do, apparently. And while I can’t find out where that woman is hiding, I did find out that she’s running. She knows the contract is still active, and she’s leaving Earth. Captain Janeway is pulling strings inside Starfleet, using military transportation to keep her wife out of the public data streams.” Her smile was decidedly cold. “Fortunately, I have access to other data streams. They’re flying her out tomorrow. That’s Monday, February eleventh. She’ll be on a ship called the Tagus. I can’t find out where it’s going; they’ve classified the flight plan too deeply for me to reach it. And I don’t know what time they’re leaving. That part will be up to you to deal with.”

Her eerie light eyes were unblinking as she said, “I want that woman out of the picture. The double pay offer my mother made you is still valid. When I hear the news that Lynne Hamilton is dead, I’ll make the transfer. I hope to hear that news very soon.”

The message ended. He immediately reactivated it, this time watching her facial expressions and body language. She didn’t seem nervous or awkward, which he’d have expected if Starfleet had forced her to record this as a means of saving her mother. To the contrary, she seemed genuinely angry. And just as arrogant as her mother.

It could still be a trap. She had an incentive to work with Starfleet if they were going to imprison her mother on attempted sabotage charges. But he knew a bit about the Federation justice system, and he also knew that his cell’s organizational structure precluded the possibility of evidence being available to charge their employers. That was part of the service they provided, and what had helped make them so successful. Melanie Hamilton would be a fool if she voluntarily offered evidence of her conspiracy to commit murder as a means of bargaining out a lesser charge.

The fact that Elise Hamilton hadn’t given him specifics on the departure time and destination of the ship also seemed to indicate that this
wasn’t a trap. If it was, he was pretty sure that Starfleet would want to make it as sweet as possible. They weren’t known for their subtlety.

Well, he would proceed cautiously. But if this was for real, it was too good to pass up. He wanted this to be done, once and for all. And he wanted to leave this pit in the galaxy far behind him.
Elise was in the shower again. Recording that message had made her almost physically ill, and Alison had taken her straight home afterward. Her performance had been amazing, but the aftermath looked dangerously close to a breakdown. For a moment Alison had been angry at Kathryn and Lynne for putting Elise in that position, but then she’d managed to take a step back and recover her normal perspective. Elise had wanted to do it. She had leaped at the chance to make up for the damage her mother had done. But it had been difficult to watch.

She heard the water shut off and barely restrained herself from rushing up the stairs. Elise had asked for a little space, and she would honor that, even though she wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do. One thing she’d learned about Elise over the last twelve hours was that this woman craved physical contact. Surely she must need it now more than ever? But she picked up her book again and forced herself to read, not that she would ever remember a word of the pages she turned. By the time Elise finally walked into the living room, clean and dressed in her new casual clothes, Alison was so tense that she stood up from the couch without thinking. She remembered her promise just in time and paused, but Elise closed the distance and hugged her anyway.

“How are you?” asked Alison, pulling back to look into her eyes.
“Fine. Sorry about freaking out back there. You must think I’m a deli-
cate little flower.”

“Good God, no, I think you’re incredible. So do Kathryn and Lynne.”

“Then it was worth it, even if it doesn’t work.” She stepped away from
the couch and sat cross-legged on the floor, as close to the fire as she
could get without setting her jeans alight. “Thanks for turning this on.
I’m having a hard time keeping warm.”

“Even in those?” Alison gestured toward her thermal shirt, vest and
warm boots. Kathryn had replicated the set for her at Starfleet Headquar-
ters upon finding out that Elise hadn’t been home in two days. A second
set of clothing was still upstairs.

“Yes. Strange, isn’t it?”

Without a word Alison crossed to the cupboard against the wall,
pulled out the wool blanket, and brought it back to drape over Elise’s
shoulders. “How’s that?” she asked, settling down on the floor in front
of her.

Elise tugged the blanket around her. “Better already, thank you.” She
paused, fingering the material. “Is this—”

“Alpaca wool, yes. From my mom’s ranch.”

“No wonder it sells for so much. It’s so soft and light!”

“And it has incredibly high thermal properties. The colors are all
natural, too. That’s not dyed wool, it’s wool from different colored
animals.”

“It’s beautiful.” Elise rubbed her cheek on it. “I can’t get over how soft
it is.”

“And you look beautiful in it.” Alison realized too late that this prob-
ably wasn’t the time. “Sorry. I don’t seem to be able to turn that off
around you.”

“That’s okay. I don’t think I want you to turn that off.” She gave Alison
a slight smile, then turned to gaze into the flames. “God, I hope it works.”

Accepting the non-sequitur, which wasn’t really all that unexpected,
Alison scooted a little closer. “Me too. Those people are amazingly good at
their jobs, though. If the Cardassian takes the bait, it’s over.”

“I wonder how Lynne feels about being bait?”

“I think she’s itching to get her hands on whoever it is that’s been
causing her so much trouble.”
Elise settled an elbow on her knee and rested her chin in her hand. “That would be my mom.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“But it’s true. That’s what made me so sick about it. Because I had to think like her to be convincing. That’s what Kathryn said.”

“When she was prepping you?” After spending considerable time explaining the concept and the goal of the message, and drilling Elise over and over in the key points she needed to say, Kathryn had taken her into a separate room to ‘mentally prepare her,’ as she’d put it. Alison had stayed with Lynne and Tuvok, trying to keep her mind off of what Elise was probably going through. When the two women had finally emerged, Elise’s face had been so hard and cold that Alison had barely recognized her. She’d had no opportunity to approach her then, as Kathryn had waved her off while directing Elise to sit in front of the terminal Tuvok had set for the recording. And immediately afterward—well, that hadn’t been a good time to talk about it either.

“She told me the most amazing story,” said Elise. “Did you know that Lynne’s assimilation was personal? I mean, it wasn’t just the Borg grabbing anyone who got in their way. It was the Borg Queen herself, and she took Lynne specifically.”

“No! I haven’t heard any of this.”

Apparently Kathryn and the Borg Queen had some kind of major power struggle going on. Part of it was over Seven of Nine. And part of it—now, this is my interpretation, so don’t you dare tell Kathryn—but those women were both alpha bitches and they hated each other. It was a grudge match. When the Borg Queen found out that Lynne and Kathryn were married, she saw a chance to bait a trap for Kathryn and hurt her, very badly and very personally, all at the same time. Kathryn said the only way she was able to rescue Lynne was to put herself in the mind of the Borg Queen and try to imagine what it was that she wanted, what her goals and motivations were, and why she’d chosen Lynne. That was what I had to do, put myself in the mind of a different me. The me I’d be if…if I were like my mother. Kathryn started listing off all the things that have happened, the things I could be angry about, and she did it in such a way that I really did get angry.”

“At Lynne?”

“No. At my mother.” She turned her head and met Alison’s eyes.
“Kathryn was trying to make me think like her, but I can’t. The more I thought about what’s happened, the more I realized that all of it has happened because of Mom, not Lynne. I lost my job because of her, I probably lost my position on the board because of her, my family is shattered, I had to call Stephen and tell him hey, guess what, Mom’s in prison because she tried to kill one hundred and forty-eight people, and you can imagine how well that went. Anyway, I was thinking about all this, and then Kathryn asked how I’d show that anger if I were like Mom. I said Mom is always in control, she shoves it down, and she gets what she wants. And Kathryn said good, then you know exactly what to do. She pointed toward the door and said, that woman is taking everything of value away from you, everything you’ve worked for. You want her dead. Now go out there and tell that Cardassian exactly how to kill her.”

“Jesus. No wonder you looked so cold.”

“Did I?”

“You came out of that room looking like a whole different person.”

“Well, in a way, I was.”

“So…” Alison didn’t quite know how to ask. “What happened afterward?”

Elise dropped her head. “That is so embarrassing.”

“No, it’s not. Come on, Elise. Everyone in that room thought you were terrific. Christ, you nailed it on your first try! They were just worried about you and wanting to help.” She paused. “Well, Commander Tuvok looked like he wished he were somewhere else.”

Elise snorted. “Vulcans aren’t keen on being around hysterical Humans.”

“You weren’t hysterical. You were just very upset.”

“Where exactly is the line between those two?” When Alison made no answer, Elise sighed and said, “What happened was that I said those words about wanting Lynne out of the picture and making the transfer when I’d heard she was dead, and suddenly I knew my mom had said those exact same things. I don’t mean I imagined it, I mean I knew it. Mom and I have a lot of the same speech patterns. And that connection… knowing that we’d both said it, but she meant it…I really thought I was going to throw up then.” She looked sideways at Alison. “Sorry about the false alarm.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t have to use it.” Alison had gone running for a
wastebasket after seeing Elise turn deathly pale and cover her mouth. But by the time she’d returned, Lynne was crouched next to the chair, telling Elise to put her head down on her knees, rubbing her back and assuring her that it was just a recording, it hadn’t been real.

“It was such a mental disconnect. First hearing my mom’s voice echoing in my head when I said those words, and then hearing Lynne’s voice for real, telling me it was okay. All I could think was, it’s not okay.”

“That’s what you said.” Several times.

“I don’t remember saying anything. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. It was hard to even look Lynne in the face.”

“I think she understood.” Alison put an arm around her back, wanting to comfort her. “I actually had a hard time looking at her or Kathryn for a while there.”

Elise’s head came up in surprise. “Why?”

“Because I was so angry that they’d put you in such a terrible position.”

“They didn’t ‘put me’ anywhere. I wanted to do it.”

“I know. I reminded myself of that. But I was still angry.”

A smile ghosted across Elise’s face. “Feeling a bit protective, perhaps?”

“Maybe. I’m not admitting anything.”

“Right.” Elise leaned in and kissed her, for the first time since they’d returned home. “Thank you for being protective, even though you’re not admitting it. And don’t forget that there was nobody else who could have recorded that message. It had to be me. I’m glad I could do it. I’m just feeling a little ridiculous now. The things those women have been through, and you’d never know it to look at them…and then I fall apart over a stupid recording.”

“Stop it,” said Alison, just as the wall terminal chimed. She rose, dropping a kiss on Elise’s forehead and adding, “Believe me, ridiculous is the last word I’d apply to you. ‘Strong’ would be a better one.” A few steps took her to the terminal, where she saw exactly the name she’d been expecting. “It’s for you.”

“It is?” Elise stood up, draping the blanket over the back of the couch as she came over. “Oh.” She accepted the call, her voice decidedly unenthusiastic as she said, “Hi, Lynne.”

“Hi. Are you feeling better?”

“I’m fine. Just embarrassed.”
“Oh, god, don’t be. I was actually thinking I might be calling too soon; that you hadn’t had enough time yet. Elise, I’m really sorry. I had no idea recording that message would hit you that way, but if I’d thought about it—”

“If you’d thought about it, you’d have remembered that I was the only one who could do it, and you didn’t have much choice. Don’t be sorry. It had to be done. I’m glad I could help.”

“You helped a lot. Kathryn said that was far and above what she’d been hoping for. She’s very optimistic that it’ll work.”

“I really hope so. For everyone’s sake.”

Lynne nodded. “Thank you for doing it. And for getting that code from your mother. If we pull this off tomorrow, it will be because of you. I won’t forget that.”

“I owed it to you.”

“The fact that you believe that says a lot.” She eyed the two of them, standing side by side, and smiled. “Take care of her, Alison.”

“I will.”

“I’ll call tomorrow.”

“You’d better,” said Alison. “I mean that.”

“We’re taking every precaution. But the trap won’t work without bait. I have to be there. And frankly, I’m looking forward to meeting this bastard. Or these bastards, if there’s more than one. I think we might have a few things to say to each other. Elise—thanks again. You were amazing.”

She signed off, leaving Elise and Alison looking at each other.

“You know,” said Elise, “for the first time I’m thinking maybe I’ve misplaced my pity. Those Cardassians aren’t going to know what hit them, are they?”
The first searches hadn’t returned a single record on a ship called the Tagus. Gohat had begun to think that Elise Hamilton was either an idiot or had been feeding him bad information for some inexplicable reason. But then he drilled into protected Starfleet records and discovered why the Tagus didn’t exist in general data sources: it was a new ship, just built at Earth Station McKinley, and still making test runs. That made it a perfect ship to transport someone off the grid—no passenger list would exist, not even within the protected Starfleet database, since ships still in testing would never have passengers. They didn’t even have full crews. Captain Janeway had indeed chosen well.

His computer penetration skills were unfortunately not up to breaking into the classified flight plan. That had been Nivel’s specialty. But he had not gotten this far in his career by letting the first wall stop him; there were other ways to gain information. When he broke into the records of Earth Station McKinley, which were not nearly so well encrypted, he found that the Tagus was scheduled for an 0630 departure the following morning. Not much time to plan an assault, but enough.

Being a careful man, he checked the records of the other three local Starfleet shipyards, and discovered that the USS Valiant was also departing Earth orbit at 0630. A coincidence, surely, that a heavily armed Defiant class warship would be leaving Earth at precisely the same moment as a
much more lightly armed vessel, which happened to be carrying his target.

Except he didn’t believe in coincidence. The Valiant was going as escort, he was certain of it. And a back check of records showed that the previous test run of the Tagus, just four days earlier, had not included any escorts, warship or otherwise.

Was Janeway simply protecting her wife, or was she setting a trap? Did she have the necessary influence within Starfleet to manage this kind of protection? The co-opting of a test flight and the use of an entire warship? Or was Starfleet allocating these resources as part of a legal operation?

A few more minutes of reflection brought him to the conclusion that it didn’t matter. Even if she were setting a trap, he was already forewarned. The sudden appearance of a warship off his bow would not be the surprise they expected it to be. Now it was simply a matter of figuring out how to avoid the trap and still snatch the bait. Because if there was one thing he was certain of, it was that Lynne Hamilton would be on board the Tagus. Janeway was too smart to set a trap without bait; she would know that he would never make a move unless it were worthwhile. And even if it turned out not to be a trap, then the existence of a warship escort indicated that Janeway was taking no chances with the safety of her wife. No, Hamilton would be there.

And so would he.
“Ready?” asked Kathryn.

“Ready. Let’s get it done.” Lynne turned to Gretchen for a goodbye hug. “Please don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

Gretchen, still in her bathrobe, tried to snort but didn’t quite carry it off. “It had better be. Or I’ll be extremely upset with both of you.”

For the first time, it occurred to Kathryn that her mother had never before watched a loved one go into certain danger. Her father’s career had been in diplomacy and strategy, a safe life that was cut short by a twist of fate, not any foreseen danger. But this was different, and it showed in Gretchen’s face. She wanted to reassure her, to tell her that in the larger scheme of her career this wasn’t even particularly dangerous, but she knew that words would never suffice.

“I promise I’ll bring her back,” she said. “And I always keep my promises.”

“She does,” Seven confirmed. “Besides, we’ll be there to make sure of it.”

“Just make sure you’re back by lunch,” Gretchen said, putting on a brave face. “I’m making your grandmother’s fried chicken recipe. Don’t be late. It’s not the same once it gets cold.”

“We’ll be back long before then,” Revi assured her. “And we’ll be hungry.”
“Good. Because I have chocolate chip banana bread for dessert.”
“Oh hell,” said Lynne. “I am definitely coming back for that.”

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“CAPTAIN ON DECK!” Jorel announced, barely able to conceal his awe. Captain Janeway was on his ship. When he’d received the orders he’d been first stunned and then as excited as a new cadet piloting his first shuttle. Now he was simply trying not to look like a drooling idiot as the famous captain stepped onto his bridge, accompanied by her gorgeous wife.

“As you were,” said Janeway. “And thank you for giving Lynne and me a lift.”

His bridge crew chuckled, already put at ease by her calm assurance.

“It’s our pleasure,” said Jorel. “I’m sure you’ll find the Tagus up to the task.”

“I’m sure I’ll find her and her crew up to the task. May I?” She gestured at the first officer’s chair, and when he nodded she turned to her wife. “Have a seat, Lynne.”

“And where are you going to sit?” Lynne Hamilton looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I’ll stand behind you.”

“No. Captain, take my chair, please,” said Jorel. “Ms. Hamilton can have the first officer’s chair, and I will stand.”

Janeway turned to pin him with a serious stare. “Captain Jorel, the Tagus is your ship. I have no intention of captaining her—that’s an honor you’ve earned. We’re just here to enjoy your hospitality for as long as it takes to get this done.”

“But I can captain the ship while standing.”

“Not if you can’t see the displays at your station.” She gestured toward the panels built into his chair arms.

“This is ridiculous,” said Lynne. “It will be easier for me to stand.” She and Janeway shared a look before the captain shrugged.

“All right. Captain, whenever you’re ready.” She strolled to the chair and gracefully draped herself into it, making Jorel feel like a clod by comparison. He waited until Ms. Hamilton had taken up her position behind the captain and then sat down in his own chair, savoring the sensation. The Tagus was his first command, and he was nearly as proud of
her as he’d been of his son’s birth. Not that he would *ever* tell his wife that.

“Lieutenant Delphin, take us out of dock. Half-thrusters.”

“Aye, sir.”

On the bridge-spanning viewscreen—one of his favorite things about this ship—the walls of the dock began to slide past. It was a view he never tired of, giving him a tremendous sense of anticipation.

“We’re clear of the dock,” announced Delphin.

“Bring us around and engage engines, one-quarter impulse until we clear the orbital zone.”

“Aye, sir.”

The subtle change of the engines thrummed in his sensitized ears as the ship moved away from Earth. Soon they were passing the Moon and nosing out into open space, where they changed up to full impulse. Twenty-one minutes after that they passed the boundary of the inner system, and Jorel ordered the jump to warp six.

“Is our escort on sensors?” he asked.

“No, sir.”

“Good,” commented Janeway. “If we can’t see it, they can’t see it.”

Yes, thought Jorel, *but if we can’t see it, how can we be certain it will be in the right place at the right time?* He’d had no experience with this sort of tactic before, and the unknowns were making him nervous. But Captain Janeway sat there in a pose of total ease, her legs crossed and her hands loosely linked in her lap, and he felt himself calming just from looking at her. This woman knew what she was doing.

After thirty minutes at warp, the total lack of activity had reduced his tension to nearly nothing. It was almost possible to believe that they were merely on another test run, albeit far slower than the last one had been. Then the guest in that chair had been Commander Tuvok, who had sat just as quietly and silently as Captain Janeway was now. And yet—he looked at her again from the corner of his eye—the *quality* of that silence was entirely different. Commander Tuvok had the stillness of a person removed from the situation. Captain Janeway had the ease of a person very much inside the situation, but in absolute control of it.

This was the kind of captain he wanted to be. He wondered if this ease was something she’d been born with, something she’d learned in training,
or something that had happened to her in those Delta Quadrant years. Maybe all three. Probably all three, because he knew other captains who’d been through hell in the Dominion War, and their experiences hadn’t given them this kind of assured calm in the face of impending combat. Suddenly he understood exactly why the crew of *Voyager* had survived seven full years alone, without backup or support.

Behind Captain Janeway, whose gaze stayed on the viewscreen, he could see Ms. Hamilton looking around and observing the bridge curiously. He knew it was a great deal smaller than what she’d been used to on *Voyager*, but the layout was extremely efficient. He tried to see it through her eyes, and noted that his crew worked the stations silently and with total professionalism. Though they’d only been together as a crew for a few weeks, he felt they were already a good team. It occurred to him that Captain Janeway hadn’t even had her crew that long before being thrown into the Delta Quadrant. If he and his crew were tossed into another quadrant right now, would they pull together the way hers had?

His musings were interrupted by a phaser attack that came out of nowhere, jarring them all in their seats, and he looked at his operations officer in shock. “What the hell was that?”

“A Cardassian runabout, sir! I don’t know where it came from, it wasn’t on sensors a few seconds ago—I’ve been running constant sweeps!”

“It wasn’t on my sensors either,” his weapons officer confirmed. “I’ve notified the *Valiant.*” She was fresh out of the Academy, and though clearly nervous in her first combat situation, she hadn’t forgotten her orders.

“Good. Helm, evasive action. Ensign Philoznia, what’s our shield status?” he demanded, as they all hung on for a second hit.

“Down to eighty-five percent on the aft port shields.”

“Return fire, full phasers.”

They waited, clinging to their seats as the ship shuddered repeatedly and Ensign Philoznia sweated over her weapons panel. “Targeting scanners can’t lock on!” she cried in frustration. “That ship is dodging everything!”

“Switch to manual,” he said. “Ops, monitor shield strength. What’s the ETA of the *Valiant*?”

“Three point eight minutes.”
“I’d like that ship under control before they get here,” he said, hoping to instill some confidence in his crew. “Let’s show them that the escort was appreciated but not needed.”

But the repeated shuddering of their ship was not a good sign, nor was the steady readout of their diminishing aft port shields.

“They know what they’re doing,” said Janeway. “They’re opening a hole in the shields.”

Shit! “Reroute power to aft shields! Philoznia, report,” he called.

“Two direct hits, sir, but this thing is damned hard to hit and our phasers don’t seem to be doing any damage.”

“Keep at it. If you have a clear shot, fire torpedoes.”

“Yes, sir.”

The extra power to their rear shields helped, but it was clearly going to be a stopgap measure in the face of the continual assault on what Jorel now realized was a single, precise point. He was more grateful than he would ever admit by the appearance of the Valiant off their bow.

“This is the USS Valiant to unknown Cardassian ship,” came the calm voice of their captain. “Break off your attack or be destroyed.”

As the ship shuddered again, Hamilton commented wryly, “I don’t think they’re listening.”

“Tagus, we have no clear shot. The ship is right on top of you.”

“Valiant, take it anyway,” Jorel said.

Janeway sat up sharply. “No, wait—”

The Valiant opened fire, and this time the impact felt twice as strong.

“No damage to the Cardassian,” reported Philoznia. “But our aft shields are at fifteen percent. There’s a hole opening!”

Janeway jumped out of her chair, turning to face her wife, who looked back at her with wide eyes. Another shudder, and Jorel watched in horror as Hamilton’s body began to shimmer.

“Jam that transporter!” he shouted, but he knew even as he gave the order that it was too late. Hamilton dissolved, leaving Janeway staring at empty space where her wife had been.

They had one last chance.

“Valiant, the ship is leaving. You’ll have a clear shot,” he called.

“Target propulsion systems only!”

“Understood.”

“Philoznia, give them some help.”
“Yes sir!”

Jorel watched on screen as the Cardassian ship moved away from his ship, paused—and disappeared. He spun around to face his ops officer. “Can you track it?”

“I’m…no, sir. There’s no sign of it.”

“How did a Cardassian runabout get a cloaking device?” he demanded. Janeway tapped her commbadge. “Janeway to Delta Flyer. Is it transmitting?”

“We have it.”

“Launch.” She turned to Jorel. “Open your shuttle bay doors, Captain, or the Flyer is going right through them.”

He nodded to his ops officer, feeling about two centimeters high. No matter what she’d told him in the beginning, he had hoped to prevent Hamilton from being taken at all.

“Don’t worry, Captain,” she said reassuringly. “Our Cardassian friends don’t know who they’re dealing with.”

Seven kept one eye on the frequency she was tracking and another on Tom Paris, who had cleared the shuttle bay doors with perhaps one meter to spare. “I don’t believe it would have impacted the outcome of our mission if you’d waited for the doors to open all the way,” she observed.

The tips of Tom’s ears were red. “They don’t open as quickly as Voyager’s,” he admitted. “Going to warp six.”

“Insufficient,” said Seven half a minute later. “Doppler shift shows them at warp seven.”

“That’s pushing it,” said Revi from behind her.

“Ha!” Tom increased speed. “You don’t know the Delta Flyer. She can handle it.”

“I was talking about the Cardassian runabout, Tom.”

“We’re gaining,” Seven reported. “But not quickly enough.”

“Warp seven point seven five,” Tom said.

“Better,” said Seven in satisfaction.

“Do you think that runabout is ready for Borg phasers?” asked Revi conversationally.
Gohat beamed his prey directly into the containment unit with a hoarse shout of triumph. Finally! It had been difficult to locate her; she must still have been using whatever device allowed her to scatter her Borg energy signature. But what was impossible to see from an orbital scan had been feasible from close proximity—barely.

He banked steeply, throwing off yet another phaser shot from the Tagus, and estimated that he had about five seconds before the Valiant started firing torpedoes. Fortunately, he only needed three. The cloaking device powered up, he changed direction once again just in case they fired at his last position, and then went straight to warp. A quick scan showed both the Tagus and the Valiant sitting in space, baffled. Only then did he allow himself a smile. So typical of Starfleet, to assume that bigger was better. A warship like the Valiant was only good in wide open combat, not close-in situations. If Janeway had been smart, she’d have taken single-pilot fighters with her. That would have been a serious problem for him. But he’d counted on her arrogance, and he’d been right.

He set the ship to autopilot, checked the positions of the two ships one more time to be sure, and then gave himself the reward he’d been waiting for. It had been a very long time coming, and he was going to enjoy this.

She was standing at the edge of the containment unit, watching him as he came through the hatch. “This won’t work,” she said.

He ignored her, advancing until he was just on the other side of the bars. “It just did.” His eyes went to the band she wore on her left arm. “So that’s what was scattering your energy signal? Brilliant, I do have to admit that. Kept me guessing for a long time. If your wife hadn’t been so stupid as to change a winning game, I might never have found you.”

“Looks empty in here,” she said pointedly. “Missing your colleagues much?”

With a snarl of rage he slammed his fist against the bars. “Don’t push me, Human. I’d planned to kill you with some mercy, but I’m rapidly changing my mind. Pulling your arms out of their sockets would be a fitting tribute to my friends.”

“Oh, they were your friends. Sorry I had to kill them. But it was self-
defense.” She gave him a vicious smile. “And I’d like to see you try that
arm-pulling trick. Or are you afraid to let me out of here and take me on?”

“I am afraid of no Human, let alone you,” he snapped, reaching for the
key panel. Then he stopped, his training finally overcoming his anger.
“But you’re not Human, are you? You’re part Borg.”

She said nothing, watching him silently, and he shook his head with a
wry chuckle. “Very good, Human. You almost had me going. But I’m not
endangering my victory for the sake of my pride. I owe your death to my
friends.” He unholstered his phaser. “However, I can still make it a slow
and painful one. If I set this to the mid-level—” he adjusted the setting as
he spoke — “then I can simply burn off parts of your body, one at a time,
and the phaser will cauterize even as it burns. You’ll live exactly as long as
I want you to. But you’ll be screaming every second.”

“You are a bloodthirsty one,” she said, unafraid even as he lifted the
phaser. He paused, waiting for her to show the fear he craved, then
shrugged. The first shot would end her bravado.

She smiled as the ship shuddered beneath their feet. “Whoops. Looks
like someone found you. By the way, this band on my arm? It’s a locator.
You beamed aboard the one thing we needed to finish you off.”

Oh, he’d wanted to make her sorry. But there was no time left, and he
was willing to trade his enjoyment for her certain death. “Then I guess I’ll
finish you off first,” he said, swiftly changing the phaser setting back to
the highest level. Without another word he fired—and stared in shock as
the beam passed right through her body, vaporizing part of the hull. She
dove for the floor, dodging the shower of molten hull fragments, then
raised her head and looked at him. “Do that one more time and you’ll
breach the hull,” she said. “I’d advise against it.”

“What…” He stood there, slack-jawed in disbelief. “What are you?”

“The wrong one,” she said. Her gaze flicked over his shoulder and he
spun, seeing too late the cloud of gas entering the room. It seized his
lungs before he got two steps, sending him into spasms of coughing. He
stumbled, falling to his knees, and the last impossible thing he saw was
his prisoner simply stepping through the bars.

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“Delta Flyer to the Doctor.”
“Good to hear a friendly voice, Mr. Paris! I must say, the company in here leaves a lot to be desired.”

Tom and Seven looked at each other and shook their heads. “Doctor, are you all right?” asked Seven. Their biggest concern had been potential damage to his portable emitter, which was one reason why Kathryn had asked her to be on the team.

“Oh, I’m perfectly fine. Almost got my emitter knocked out by some flaming hull plating, but my host is now sleeping peacefully.”

“Excellent,” said Revi. “Can you go to the environmental controls and vent the gas? Seven and I really don’t want to be coughing our lungs out when we beam over.”

“Certainly.”

As they waited, Seven opened a channel to the Tagus and got a very worried-looking Captain Jorel on the screen. Next to him, Kathryn looked as calm as ever. “We have the runabout,” she informed them. “And one sleeping Cardassian. The Doctor is unharmed.”

“Excellent,” said Kathryn. “Get me one final bit of positive news and then I can get my first good night’s sleep in a month.”

“The Doctor is venting the gas now. Revi and I will beam over as soon as it’s safe. I’ll contact you the moment I know.”

“Thanks, Seven. Good work, everyone.”

Seven signed off and closed down her board. “Enjoy your peaceful flight back,” she said.

Tom grinned. “Feels damned good to be here again. I’ve missed this ship.”

“It’s only been a few weeks, Tom,” said Revi. “Is that Earth soil already getting too heavy for your feet?”

He shrugged. “It’s been a great few weeks off, but you know...I do miss flying.”

“Maybe you can apply for a position as a flight instructor,” she suggested. “That would get you into space and still keep you at home.”

He was appalled. “That’s not flying. That’s playing nursemaid with a side dish of disaster. You think teaching young pilots is safe? That’s one of the most dangerous jobs in the fleet! Those kids are idiots.”

Revi tried very hard, but broke down a second later with a huge snort of laughter. Tom’s affronted look lasted only a moment longer before he
joined in, and Seven watched them in amused affection. She had missed this, too.

The Doctor called with the all-clear, and she and Revi promptly beamed to the Cardassian ship. On first glance, Seven thought it might give a Borg scout ship some competition in utilitarian austerity.

“What a dump,” Revi said, looking around at the dark colors and bare metal. “I want to go back to the *Flyer.*”

“Wouldn’t you like to check on our new patient first?” asked the Doctor.

Seven felt a mental disconnect looking at him. In the form of Lynne, and with her voice, his presence was unsettling. “You check the Cardassian,” she told Revi, “I’ll check the database, and then I’m returning the Doctor to his normal form. As quickly as possible.”

“I’m hurt,” he said. “You don’t like me as a full-headed brunette? I’ve been rather enjoying the sensation of having so much hair.”

“Ugh,” said Revi, walking toward the back of the ship. “I agree, Seven, it’s weirding me out too.”

As the two doctors made certain of the Cardassian’s continued unconsciousness, Seven began combing the files in the database, looking for the one critical bit of information they still needed. She found it easily, and was on the comm with Kathryn before Revi and the Doctor had even returned.

“Our prisoner is named Gohat,” she said. “He was the last of a cell of four. The other three were killed in the avalanche; he beamed their bodies into space. There are no others on the contract.”

Kathryn visibly slumped. “Thank god. That’s the best news I’ve heard in a long time. I owe all of you a gourmet dinner and a night on the town and whatever else you want, just name it. We are going to celebrate.”

Seven liked the sound of that. “Where will we go?”

Kathryn’s smile lit up the screen. “Any goddamned place we want to.”

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**Gohat groaned,** his hand going to his temple even as he struggled to sit up. His head was pounding, the light hurt his eyes, and he felt like he’d been in a shuttle crash.
And to top off his misery, the first thing he saw when he managed to get his eyes all the way open was that woman, looking straight at him. Through the humming forcefield of what was undoubtedly a Starfleet brig cell.

“If it had been up to me, you’d have a lot more hurting than just your head,” she said.

He stared at her. “You aren’t Human.”

“Oh, I am,” she assured him. “But I’m not who you captured. You locked on to a Borg/Human biosign, yes, but it wasn’t mine. It was produced artificially, with a device our holographic doctor was wearing.”

“Holo—” He felt as if his brain were slightly out of sync. “My ship has no holoemitters.”

“He doesn’t need them,” she said. “By the way, he told me about your charming offer to kill me slowly and painfully. Something about screaming every second? I’m thinking that a few decades in prison couldn’t happen to a more deserving fuckwad than you.”

“You killed my friends,” he said, the anger returning. “I owed it to them.”

“You owed them nothing. They died in the service of a contract that was cancelled nine days ago. This wasn’t their revenge, it was yours.” She lowered her voice, speaking in a tone of utter contempt. “And you failed. You failed your contract, you failed your friends, and you failed even in your pathetic revenge.”

His anger died abruptly, both from her contempt and his realization of the truth. He had failed. His target was standing there, speaking to him with no fear at all, because she had won and he had lost.

Her gaze never left his. “I just want to give you a view of your future,” she said. “You’ll get a trial, because that’s how the Federation justice system works. And you’ll get a lot of publicity, because after the war, the story of a Cardassian cell coming to Earth to kill a Human for pay is going to be big, big news. Which means your face, your name and your story will be going all the way back to Cardassia. Do you have any friends there? Family? Hm, I bet you’ve got a few enemies. They’re all going to know about your failure. You have no name left. No honor. And when that trial is over, you’re going to a penal facility for a very long time. Where you’ll be surrounded by Humans who all know what a failure you are. And you can
spend the next twenty years doing stupid, menial labor; shitty little jobs that are so beneath you, but you’ll do them anyway because it’s better than sitting in your cell, being bored out of your mind. And you don’t want to sit in that cell, because it gives you time to think, and the last thing you want is time to think about how much you wish you’d been smarter than to fall for a trap like you did today. You don’t want to think about how you failed.”

Her voice was almost hypnotic, and she spoke as if she knew his deepest fears. Every time she uttered the word fail he flinched, the truth of it scorching his very soul. He couldn’t take his eyes off hers, feeling trapped by her contemptuous gaze and knowing that she had earned her supremacy over him. He was in a Starfleet brig, and she was alive.

“Failure is death,” she whispered, and his eyes widened in shock. She knew the motto of the Obsidian Order? She nodded, seeing his reaction, and spoke in a voice so soft that he had to strain to hear it. “When they beamed you here, they removed all of your weapons in the transporter buffer. But they didn’t think about your patch, because it’s not a weapon. You still have it. But…” She paused, letting him hang. “I’m not the only one who knows about the Obsidian Order. When Kathryn gets here, she’ll make sure your patch is removed. And then you’ll have nothing left at all. No way to escape. Your last chance at honor, gone.”

The patch. The insurance policy that every member of the Obsidian Order carried; a small molar patch encapsulating a tiny but lethal amount of poison. Because no one in the Order would ever, ever allow themselves to be captured alive. Without thinking, he ran his tongue over his tooth, feeling the reassuring presence of the patch he’d worn most of his adult life. She saw it, a slight twitch of her eyebrow acknowledging their shared understanding.

“You don’t have much time,” she whispered. “They’re on their way.”

Why was she doing this? She had won, and yet she was giving up her victory. In her place, he wouldn’t have allowed any options. He would have made her suffer. But she was offering him release, and the last shred of honor he could retain.

He heard the swish of a door opening, heard the sound of boots, saw two other women appear, but it was all peripheral to the gaze holding him. He heard the captain give the order for the guards to stand ready for
the force field to come down, and recognized the other as the doctor Lira had said she’d killed. Even Lira had failed, even Lira...

The field was down, the doctor was coming in with a hypospray, and he had no time. With his vision still filled by the woman he had tried to kill, he bit down on the patch.

And smiled.
“Why didn’t you take it off in the runabout?” Kathryn was trying to pace off her frustration, but it wasn’t working. Her perfect plan had unraveled at the very last second. The Cardassian prisoner she’d promised to Admiral Necheyev—the strategic intelligence asset that had made such an enormous allocation of Starfleet resources worth it—had eluded her grasp.

“I’m sorry,” said Revi. “I wasn’t thinking about stopping him from being a danger to himself, I was thinking about stopping him from being a danger to us.”

“Goddammit!” She paced across the room one more time, then dropped onto the chair next to Revi. “Necheyev is not going to be happy with me. I really needed to deliver this. Having a member of the old Obsidian Order in her hands was the one thing that convinced her to sign off on all this. Shit, I can’t believe it.” She hated the fact that she wasn’t in command of this ship, that she hadn’t been right there on the scene when the Cardassian was beamed over, that she wasn’t in control of every facet. She didn’t even have a ready room to sit in while she yelled at Revi. Instead she was in a conference room on the Valiant as it and the Tagus sped back toward Earth.

“Leave her alone, Kathryn,” said Lynne. “It’s not her fault.”

“Actually, it is. I should have thought about it.”
“No, it’s not. It’s mine.”
Startled, Kathryn looked across the table at her wife. “How is it your fault?”
“Because I told him that if he didn’t use it now, he’d never have the chance.”
A dead silence fell across the room.
“You what?” Kathryn’s voice was at its lowest register.
“You heard me.”
“What in the hell were you thinking?” She was rapidly working up a full head of steam when Lynne’s quiet answer cut right through her.
“I was thinking I want to be free.”
Deflating, she said, “But you would have been free. Lynne, he was never going to get away.”
“From us, today? No. But could you guarantee lifetime imprisonment? No, because the charge could only be attempted murder. You couldn’t even get him on kidnapping because he only kidnapped a hologram. He’d have gone to prison for a good long time, yes, but not for the rest of our lives. And it was personal to him. You know that. You think his need for revenge would have gotten any smaller once he served out his term? I think it would have gotten stronger. I think he’d have spent his free time dreaming up the absolute perfect plan to kill me. And after these last three weeks, I can tell you that I am not going to live that way again. I don’t care if it wouldn’t be until twenty years from now. I’m not doing it.”
“So you convinced him to commit suicide?” asked Revi. Kathryn thought peevishly that instead of sounding shocked, she seemed rather fascinated.
“Nobody convinces a member of the Obsidian Order to commit suicide. That’s trained into them from the beginning. If he didn’t still believe in that training, he’d have stopped wearing the patch. But he still had it, and we all know he’d have used it sooner or later—why else would you have gone straight to his cell to remove it, Kathryn? All I did was give him a few relevant facts. Such as the fact that he’d failed in his mission and failed in his revenge. And that his failure would be very, very public. And that he was going to a Federation penal colony to think about it for a very, very long time.”
“Great.” Kathryn threw up her hands. “My wife hangs me out to dry with my supervisor, and my best friend and doctor is congratulating her!”

“What is wrong with you?” demanded Lynne, her voice unexpectedly loud. “Do you want me to live under a sentence of death? Is losing me once not enough?”

Kathryn felt all the air go out of her lungs. She could only stare, stricken, as Lynne glared at her.

“I did what had to be done. To save myself, and to save you, and everyone else I care about. And all you can think about is how it makes you look with Admiral Necheyev? Fine. Tell Necheyev that your wife went rogue on you. I’ll take the blame; I really don’t give a shit. Because I am alive, and I am free, and I am not apologizing for it.” She shoved her chair back and was out the door before Kathryn could recover her voice.

Revi let out a low whistle. “I’m thinking there are some unresolved issues there.”

“You think?” Kathryn briefly rested her face in her hands. “Fuck. I didn’t see that coming. She’s been so calm about all this.”

“Too calm,” said Revi thoughtfully. “She’s been under tremendous pressure, and that on top of Terellia. She’s never processed the fact that she died.”

“Or that she killed nine men there,” Kathryn added with a groan. “And three Cardassians a few weeks later, and in a way she’s just added one more to the total. God, Revi, they were staring at each other when we came in. She was watching him kill himself.”

Revi shook her head. “She’s right, though. It would never have ended any other way. For him it was a personal debt, and not something he’d ever forget. Especially when every day he spent among a bunch of Humans in a Federation prison would be a daily reminder.” She paused. “I don’t think hearing about his intentions from the Doctor helped, either.”

Kathryn couldn’t stop the shiver that ran through her at the reference. It had made her want to kill that Cardassian herself. But she’d been concentrating on her plan, and all the strings she’d woven together to make it happen. The favors she’d called in from Tom and the Doctor, the way she’d negotiated the resources from Necheyev with a promise of a strategic payoff, coordinating the movements of three different ships...

She had been in captain mode. But Lynne was in survival mode. They were focused on very different things. On second thought, it wasn’t such a
surprise that Lynne had snapped when she’d said that about her supervisor.

“Actually,” Revi added, “I think he’d have been even more bent on revenge after incarceration, simply because of the fact of his incarceration. Obsidian Order members are never caught alive. He’d have been the first. And he would probably have blamed her for that, too.”

Slowly, Kathryn nodded as the realization trickled through. “Well, I guess there’s nothing for it but to tell Necheyev that in five minutes of unsupervised time, he managed to kill himself. Because the truth is, this is my responsibility, not yours and not Lynne’s. I neglected to give you the order to pull that damned patch, and that opened the window of opportunity.”

Revi was shaking her head. “You shouldn’t have had to give me the order. I know about poison patches. Let me take responsibility.”

“It doesn’t work that way, though I appreciate the offer. Necheyev will be mad as hell, but I do have his ship, with a database he never got the chance to purge, and I even have a cloaking device, which is a hell of a coup. Starfleet has been wanting to get its hands on one of those for years. We could never do it without violating one treaty or another. So I’m not without resources. I just don’t have the clean sweep I was working for.”

“I’m not a strategist like you, but I do know something about the Obsidian Order. You do have a clean sweep, because Gohat was never going to tell you a thing. If Necheyev honestly thought she could get actionable intelligence from him, she was in for a disappointment.”

“He’d been kicked out, Revi. The Obsidian Order doesn’t exist anymore, and if he’d been invited into the new Intelligence Bureau, he wouldn’t be out here with his buddies, killing people for money. What makes you think he couldn’t have been encouraged to give us intelligence on the people who exiled him?”

“Because exile doesn’t change the fact that he was from the Obsidian Order, sworn to protect Cardassian interests at the cost of his life. Even if he hated the people who exiled him, he still wouldn’t have betrayed them to us. That would have been a betrayal of Cardassia itself.”

Kathryn closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Maybe you’re right. Not that it matters anymore. I still have a mess to clean up.” She looked up at Revi, who was watching sympathetically. “I appreciate
your input, and maybe I can use that when I face Necheyev. But in the meantime—"

“You need to find Lynne.”

Kathryn nodded, grateful for her understanding as she rose from her chair. “Yes, I do.”

Revi followed suit and walked with her. “It’s a small ship; she can’t have gotten—”

They stopped as the doors swished open. Lynne looked in at them, her expression tight. “Revi, can I talk to Kathryn alone?” she asked.

“Of course,” said Revi. “I have a report to file.” She slipped past Lynne, who barely acknowledged her as she stepped inside. The doors slid shut behind her, leaving them alone in the dead quiet of the soundproofed room.

“I was just on my way to find you,” said Kathryn, more to break the silence than anything else.

“I shouldn’t have walked out. But…it’s nice to know you were coming after me.”

They looked at each other, separated by one meter of space and a much larger gulf of unspoken words. Kathryn didn’t know where to start. Her instant fury at the circumvention of her plan had been almost as instantly punctured when Lynne had walked out, leaving her ears ringing with that terrible question. They were both hanging on the edge right now, but she sensed that Lynne was closer to it. Her voice had that strained tone it got when she was consciously controlling it.

At last Lynne said, “I didn’t know that you bargained Gohat’s life for the means to pull this off. You didn’t tell me how you arranged all this, and I didn’t ask. I’m sorry that you’re going to be in trouble because of me. And I think you should tell Admiral Necheyev the truth, so that she can blow up all over the right person, but I know you won’t.”

“No, I won’t.” At least she was apologizing for that much. But Kathryn had a feeling that even if Lynne had known, it wouldn’t have made a difference. “You and Revi are both trying to take this on, but it’s my responsibility. I should have thought of it, and I didn’t. Of course, I didn’t think I’d have to outwit you in addition to a Cardassian assassin. And telling Necheyev that I couldn’t control my wife, who is technically still a Starfleet contractor, is not going to earn me any points either.”

Lynne’s face closed down. “I know I’ve probably put a big hole in your
trust. And I’ll do whatever it takes to earn it back. But I had to do it, Kathryn.” Still that very careful, controlled voice.

“I really wish you hadn’t.” Though an understatement that didn’t begin to express her feelings, it was still enough to make Lynne turn her head away. Kathryn took a step closer and reached for her hand. “But not for the reason you think. Yes, I’m upset that you derailed the payoff, and that I can’t deliver what I promised to Necheyev. But I’ll get over it, and so will she. For god’s sake, that is not all I’m thinking of.”

Lynne looked up. “That’s what it sounded like. But I know how hard you’ve been working to live up to her expectations. I wish…” She lifted her other hand in a helpless gesture, unable to say anything more.

“I wish you hadn’t been involved in one more death,” Kathryn said. “That’s what I’m thinking about. Even if you didn’t kill him, you stood there and watched. You have enough memories to haunt you without adding more.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Then help me understand.”

Lynne glanced over at the conference table, then led her to the nearest chairs, never letting go of her hand as they sat facing each other. When they were both settled, she started to speak, shook her head, and finally said, “I did nothing but think about this while I was sitting here on my ass, waiting for everyone else to clean up this fucking mess for me.”

“We were not—” Kathryn closed her mouth at the look on Lynne’s face. “Go on.”

“I was thinking about how it would never be over, and how that man would probably hate me more at the end of it than he does even now. I wished he’d been with the others on the mountain, so we could have finished it once and for all back then. I wished you’d let me take him on in a closed room, with no weapons, so that we could end it fairly. I just wanted it to end.”

“I know. So did I.”

“No, you didn’t. Not the way I did. You were happy to send him to prison, but that wasn’t good enough. You were thinking of him as a strategic asset. But he wasn’t an asset, he was an assassin who valued my death above anything else. Members of the Obsidian Order have a lot in common with high-ranking Klingon warriors. Honor is just about the most powerful motivator there is for them—you’ve already seen that for
Gohat, it was more powerful than money. He had a debt of honor to his friends, and you don’t erase a debt like that just by making it difficult to pay for a couple of decades. All we were doing here was delaying the next phase. He would have come out of prison and headed straight for me. And that’s assuming he couldn’t find a way to pay his debt from inside, which is a pretty naive assumption.”

Kathryn sighed. “I know that too. But I wasn’t looking that far ahead. And anything could have happened between now and then.”

“Sure. He might have died in prison. He might have seen the light and forsaken his blood debt. He might also have spent twenty years nursing not only a blood debt, but a new and even more personal grudge against both me and you for being the reason he was in prison. Which of those do you think was the most likely outcome?” She paused, giving her a chance to answer, but when none was forthcoming she added, “He was still a threat, Kathryn. I couldn’t leave it to chance. So I gave him what he wanted.” Her mouth twisted in a bitter smile. “The funny thing is that I hated him enough to want him to suffer in prison for twenty years. I wanted him to live with the knowledge that we had beaten him in every way, including taking away every bit of honor and his only means of escape. Even though I understand his motivation, I can’t help but hate what he’s done to us, and I sure as hell wanted him to suffer for what he was planning to do to me—and you by proxy. But I wanted this to end more.”

“You let him keep his honor,” Kathryn said as understanding dawned. “By allowing him to escape.”

Lynne nodded. “He smiled at me. He thought he was winning in the end. But he did exactly what I wanted him to do. It was the only way for us to be free. So no, his death is not a memory that will haunt me.”

“Are you sure about that?” Kathryn remembered the scene she’d witnessed upon entering the brig. Lynne had been staring at Gohat, her expression cold and her body rigid. She’d thought it was a natural reaction to facing the man who’d tried to kill her, but now she wondered.

“Do you want to know the memories that do haunt me?” Lynne asked. “Seeing Revi on the biobed in sickbay, dying from a Cardassian toxin. We were linked; I felt her fear when she couldn’t breathe. I felt her dying. But even that wasn’t as bad as Seven’s absolute terror at losing her—she was literally falling apart in her mind. Remember how I could hardly even stand up after getting Revi’s heart and lungs going again? That wasn’t just
me having a little freakout over what I had to do. It was also a reaction to what was in Seven’s mind just before the link broke. I can’t possibly describe what it’s like to be linked with someone who is in the middle of her worst waking nightmare, but...let’s just say it’s a special kind of hell.”

“I can imagine,” said Kathryn, who was ashamed to realize she hadn’t even considered that until now. Revi’s near-death had frightened her, yes, but the moment her friend was safe she’d gone into captain mode, dealing with the security issues and planning their next move. She hadn’t stopped to think about the emotional ramifications. It was only now that she acknowledged to herself that she hadn’t wanted to think about them. But Lynne hadn’t had a choice.

“And then there’s the memory of you on that ski slope,” Lynne continued. “Making a huge target out of yourself because you wouldn’t leave me behind. I watched that through Revi’s eyes and for a few seconds I was certain that it would be my own waking nightmare. God, Kathryn, to watch you die because of me! Revi almost died, Seven would have died right along with her—mentally and emotionally if not physically—and you could easily have died too.”

“I would have, if they’d actually gotten you that day,” Kathryn admitted. “The same way Seven would have if Revi had died.”

“I know. That’s what haunted me—seeing the people I love most in the world get caught in the middle of all this. Watching Gohat make the choice to die? No. It doesn’t qualify. Because his death means we’re all safe. All of us. And if letting him think he won was the price for that, then I was happy to pay it. I’m only sorry that you have to pay it, too.”

“All right,” said Kathryn, choosing not to verbalize her own doubt any further. It would do no good at this point. “I have to take your word on that. And if I’m talking to you as your wife and not Captain Janeway, then I also have to admit that I’m glad it’s over, really over. I don’t want either one of us to live under a sentence of death. But if we’re talking about haunting memories, do you know the memory that most haunts me? Seeing you on Terellia, dying in a pool of blood in the middle of the street. That haunts me. So just for the record—yes, losing you once was absolutely, unequivocally enough.”

Lynne visibly deflated as she tightened her grip on Kathryn’s hand. “I’m sorry. Truly sorry. I didn’t mean it, and it was low.”

“Yes, it was. About as low as you could go without actually putting a
knife in me. You think I care about losing points with Necheyev? I care about losing you. How could you say that to me?” Her breath hitched at the end, and Lynne looked up in horror.

“Kathryn... god, please don’t. I’m so sorry.” Her voice was husky, the tears right at the surface as she lifted their linked hands to her lips. Her mouth was trembling, and Kathryn moved her chair closer to pull her into a hug.

“I know you are,” she whispered. “And I’m sorry you’ve had to go through this.” She felt the reassuring solidity of Lynne’s body in her arms, and suddenly her own body seemed to weigh twice as much as the realization hit her—it was finally over, in a way that it never would have been if her scheme had gone according to plan. It was true, Gohat might very well have been able to engineer a hit from inside prison. They would never have been safe. It hadn’t even been five weeks since Lynne had died on Terellia; the thought of losing her again made her insides twist into a knot. She was suddenly grateful beyond expression that this threat had been permanently lifted, and grateful to Lynne for lifting it, though she was certain her wife was not acknowledging the emotional price she would pay.

She tightened her arms, feeling the answering embrace and wishing they were anywhere but in a damned conference room on a ship that wasn’t even hers. It was a little alarming the way Lynne was holding on silently, without moving, and Kathryn knew she was falling off the edge. She kissed her cheek, stroked her hair, and kissed her again before finally resting their heads together. “We’re all right,” she murmured. “It’s over. And you made sure of it, and I’m glad, because I couldn’t have done it but you’re right, it was best this way. I don’t want to live like that either. It was killing both of us.”

“It was,” Lynne whispered. “I don’t even think I knew how much until now.”

“Neither did I,” Kathryn admitted.

“I’m sorry I went behind your back. I knew you’d be furious, and that was even without knowing that he was your bargaining chip. But I had to, Kathryn. I had to. I wish there had been another way without...” She couldn’t finish, a sudden sob shaking her body.

“Without making me angry?”
Lynne shook her head. “Without disappointing you,” she managed, then took in a great gulp of air.

Kathryn rubbed her back, trying to think how she could possibly respond, and only belatedly realizing that Lynne hadn’t let that breath out. “Lynne, breathe.”

The air came out explosively, followed by the sobs she’d been holding back, and Kathryn felt her own tears rising as she held on. I have a wife who can watch a man commit suicide and not blink. And then she falls apart because she knows she hurt me and she’s afraid of disappointing me.

“You are something else, do you know that?” she said. “What the hell am I going to do with you?”

Another head shake, but Lynne was bringing herself under control. “Fire me?” she asked.

In a very black sort of way, it was almost funny. “I may have to. Especially if you can be heard on the security logs telling a valuable intelligence asset that he’d better use his patch or lose the chance. I won’t be able to protect you from that.”

With a sniff, Lynne pulled back and straightened, wiping the tears off her cheeks. “They won’t hear me. I was barely even whispering when I said that.”

“You really thought of everything, didn’t you?”

Lynne looked at her sadly. “Everything except how to do that without getting on the wrong side of you. And then I made it even worse by saying that awful thing.” A fresh wash of tears overflowed, and she bent her head as she wiped them away. “I don’t know how you can forgive me,” she whispered.

“I think you might have hurt yourself with that worse than me,” Kathryn said, lifting Lynne’s head with a gentle hand. She brushed away a tear-dampened lock of hair, trying to soothe the devastation written so clearly in in the watery eyes looking back at her. “And while I’ll never say it was okay, I do know you’ve been under more pressure than anyone should have to deal with.”

“And you haven’t? It’s not just me, Kathryn. But you seem to hold on to a lot more grace than I do.”

“No, I just dove back into the captain role and focused on the things I could control instead of the things I couldn’t. Which basically means I haven’t dealt with any of this at all. But as far as being disappointed in
you...that’s not the issue here. I understand why you made that choice. It’s not the one I would have made, it’s on a thin moral edge, and it’s going to cause me a shipload of trouble. But I understand why you did it. I also notice that you told me right away. You could have lied, or just not said anything. That would have disappointed me.”

With a wan smile, Lynne said, “I already learned that lesson—the hard way. I’d never have lied to you about this. Besides, even if I’d considered it, I couldn’t let Revi take the blame.”

“Do you know, she might actually deserve it.” A shiver of comprehension went through Kathryn even as she spoke.

“What?”

“She went out that door saying she was going to file her report. I’ll bet you a month’s leave she’s going to take responsibility. And I’ll bet you a second month’s leave that she’s doing it for a very good reason. She has the same Collective knowledge of the Obsidian Order that you do. And she doesn’t make mistakes like this one.”

Lynne’s eyes were huge. “You think she intentionally left his patch?”

Kathryn’s mind was clicking over everything Revi had said. “With a totally clear conscience,” she said, shaking her head in wry amazement. “I never gave her the order. If I had, she’d have pulled it. Since I didn’t...she simply opted not to act independently. She broke no rules and countermanded no orders. And she gave him the opportunity to take care of all of our problems for us. Except for my explanation to Necheyev, that is, which she’ll do her best to smooth over.”

“You don’t know that,” said Lynne. “You’re guessing.”

“I am. And I’ll never ask her, because I don’t want to know. But her report will tell me a lot.”

“I won’t ask her either. But she’d better compartmentalize that little tidbit next time we link, because unlike you, I’d love to know.” She let out a long sigh and rubbed the stains of her tears away. “God, I’m tired of all this. I’m so tired of death. I just want us to live.”

“I know.” She shifted her hand to Lynne’s thigh and rubbed it gently, finding herself unable to tolerate not touching her somehow. “And we will. Starting right now.”

Lynne put her hand over Kathryn’s and looked at her intently. “You and I have to get the hell out of here. It’s summer in the southern hemisphere. I know some great beginner mountains we could get lost in.”
There was so much longing in her expression that it physically hurt to say no. “I really wish we could. But I have another week of engagements and debriefings. I’m free after that, though. Can you hang on just one more week?”

Lynne considered it for a moment, then shook her head. “No. I can’t. I’m going to explode if I have to wait one more day. I’m heading out tomorrow. Sorry, but I have to go.”

Instantly Kathryn was imagining twelve different ways Lynne could hurt herself trying to climb mountains in this frame of mind. “If I can get Revi to live without Seven for a few days, will you take her with you?”

“Doesn’t that kind of depend on whether Seven wants to go?”

Kathryn thought about their last Velocity game and said decisively, “She’ll want to go. Take my word for it.” Another thought occurred just then. “Wait. What about Barney?”

“Oh, shit!” Lynne’s eyes widened. “I forgot! What kind of a mother am I? Jesus. Okay, that’s all right. I can do day trips. Besides, tomorrow’s the day I offer him solid food for the first time. It’s all downhill from here.”

“Are you going to offer him a litter box tomorrow, too?”

“Yes. I must have read fifty different accounts on how to potty train a kitten; I’m becoming a damned expert on…” She trailed off, one side of her mouth lifting in a half-smile. “Are you distracting me?”

“Is it working?”

Lynne took a deep breath, visibly calming. “Yeah. It is. I think I really do need some kitten therapy.”

“You’ll be home in twenty minutes. We’ll beam you and Seven and Revi directly there. Save me some banana bread, okay?”

Instead of answering, Lynne picked up her hand, pressed her lips to it in a fervent kiss, and held it against her chest. “I love you.” There was so much of her heart in her eyes that Kathryn felt all her earlier pain drop away.

“I love you too.” She pulled Lynne back into an embrace, fully prepared to stay that way until they reached Earth orbit.
On the morning and it had already been a fuck of a day. The reporters from yesterday hadn’t been satisfied with just her official statement; they’d spent the entire day trying to get more. It was too juicy a story, and with most of the Hamilton clan going into hiding, Alison had been the only big name they could easily track down for a quote. Thank god for Matthew, her assistant. He’d shielded her like an old pro, which of course he was. But she’d arrived this morning to find a group of the more determined reporters waiting for her, knowing that she had to go through them to get into the building. For the love of God, could this be over already? She was tired of it.

On the other hand, yesterday had also brought her some of the best news she’d ever heard in her life. Kathryn and her people had done it. They’d captured the last assassin without a single person being hurt. Well, except for the assassin, of course, but that was his choice. And she couldn’t find it in her heart to feel the least bit sorry about it. Lynne had said she and the others involved—apparently they’d gotten a few crew-mates to help—were all meeting for a night on the town in New York to celebrate. She’d seemed very excited about the chance to dress up and actually go out like a normal person. Alison only hoped she’d been allowed to enjoy it—she and Kathryn weren’t exactly low profile people.

Her musings were interrupted by Matthew, whose cheerful face
appeared on her terminal. “Dr. Necheyev, you have a reporter waiting here who’d like to speak with you. She says she’s from the Hamilton Times?”

Alison’s initial displeasure morphed into amusement. “Does she now? Would that reporter be taller than Mile High Stadium and have her hair in a French braid?”

“Ah, I’m not certain about the stadium…” Matthew was far too well-mannered to join in her joking.

“Please show her in.” Alison stood up and was halfway across her office when the door opened, admitting Lynne and Seven of Nine. With a brilliant smile, Lynne walked straight up to her and enveloped her in a hug.

“Hey! Guess what I did today?” she said, releasing a somewhat breathless Alison.

“God, there’s no telling. Hello, Seven of Nine, good to see you,” she said, offering her hand.

“And you,” said Seven politely.

“I walked into a public transport building without a security escort! And then I transported over here and rented a hovercraft, also without an escort! Oh, and I waded through about fifty reporters getting in here. Jesus, Alison, you need a secret entrance or something.”

“Tell me about it. I’m thinking about digging a tunnel.” Alison tugged at the decidedly non-businesswear jacket. “Going mountain climbing in this?”

“Nope. Skiing. Though climbing was my original thought. I decided that I want to go back to Silverton and do it right this time. I have unfinished business on one particular run. And Seven was up for babysitting duty.”

“I’m under strict instructions from Kathryn to make sure she ‘warms up’ properly before attempting that run,” said Seven. “Though I’m unsure how effective I can be on skis.”

“Pretty effective,” said Lynne. “Because Kathryn is taking advantage of my natural protective instincts for you. She’s devious.”

Seven smiled at that, and Alison blinked in surprise. She’d never seen that woman smile and mother of God, she was gorgeous when she did.

“I believe that is the pot calling the kettle black,” Seven said.

Lynne shrugged. “That’s why we’re so good for each other.” Turning back to Alison, she asked, “How is Elise doing?”
“I’m not really sure. She went home early yesterday morning, but I don’t think she’s there now. I’ve called a couple of times, but she’s not picking up.” She tried not to let her unhappiness with that situation show on her face. She certainly had no claim on Elise and was not owed any explanations. But it hurt that she hadn’t gotten a call or even a message last night.

“I know exactly how she feels,” said Lynne, looking at her a little too closely. “You can’t always do your thinking in the company of others. She just needs a little space to breathe.”

So much for keeping her feelings off her face. “I know. And I’m giving it to her.” Not that she had any choice.

Lynne nodded. “Well, I have something else for you to give to her. It’s actually why I dropped by.” She pulled three PADDs out of her backpack and handed them over. “Reinstatement as my fund managers. For Elise, Charles and Brian. I’ve had Saator’s firm poring over the past records ever since our strategy meeting, and he tells me that those three were doing a good job. There’s no reason to keep them out anymore. I figured you’d know how to get a hold of them, and frankly I don’t want to take the time right now. Well, I would like to see Elise, but I’ll catch her later when she’s ready.”

Alison accepted the PADDs. “You’ve just made Charles a very happy man, and probably saved his marriage.”

“Is that a good thing?” asked Lynne doubtfully, and Alison couldn’t help but laugh.

“You learn fast. Anyway, thanks for these. Brian and Elise will be relieved, too. And I think it will have a special meaning for Elise. Do you want my resignation?”

“Do you want to give it?” Lynne gave her a knowing look. “Tell me, how many hours have you put in trying to get a handle on my accounts?”

“Ah…”

“That’s what I thought. You’ve done the work, I hardly think it’s fair to take away the reward. Even though I know that’s not why you did it.”

Alison, who had been about to protest, closed her mouth and shook her head. “Well, you’ll need to do a little adjustment on compensation.”

“No, I won’t.”

“What?”
“I just reinstated Elise, Charles and Brian at their original rates. And I don’t see any reason to change yours this year.”

“Sweet Jesus, Lynne! You’ll be paying out fifteen percent! That’s what people pay their loan sharks, not their financial advisors.” If Alison hadn’t known better, she’d have thought Lynne simply didn’t realize what she was doing.

“Right. Fifteen percent of something I never had and don’t particularly need. Which is not to say I’m not enjoying the idea of buying a nice piece of property for me and my friends, and building a couple of gorgeous houses, and not worrying about the financing. But I could do that on one percent of what I already have, never mind what I might make this year. Alison, you’ve earned it. We’ll let your pay revert to the standard two point five at the end of the year, but I think it’s a bit unfair to change it now.” She gave Alison a wink and added, “Maybe you can take someone to a deserted tropical island somewhere and do some real relaxing.”

Alison stood stock still, momentarily paralyzed by the scenes her imagination was serving up. Lynne patted her shoulder and said, “I recognize that look. For the record, you two seem really good together.”

“We’re not together,” said Alison.

Lynne smiled. “Not yet.”

Seven enjoyed herself more than she’d expected. Despite the fact that it had been thirteen days since her first attempt at skiing, she seemed not to have lost any ability in the meantime. By the end of the day she was feeling quite confident on her skis—which did not translate in any way to a desire to join Lynne on her suicide run that afternoon. She still couldn’t believe that slope, nor that anyone could actually go over the edge and think of it as ‘fun’. But Lynne clearly did. After carefully examining the run and its environs, she handed the binoculars to Seven, hoisted her pack, and went over the edge with a whoop of sheer joy.

It was impossible not to think of the parallels with the last time she’d stood here, watching Lynne and Kathryn ski this run. For a moment her spine prickled in dread, waiting for disaster to strike, even though she knew empirically that it was perfectly safe. Still, she didn’t breathe easily until Lynne was at the bottom of the run, gliding to a stop and waving her
arms at Seven. Soon the shuttle they’d hired appeared over the trees, beaming Lynne off the ground and soaring up the slope until it hovered nearly over Seven’s head. Lynne shimmered back into existence, her grin nearly splitting her face.

“FUCK that was great!” she shouted. “Sorry, Seven, I hope you don’t get bored, but I have to do this a few more times. Like maybe twenty.”

Her happiness was contagious, and Seven gave her an impromptu hug. “I’ll never get bored watching you smile like that,” she said.

It seemed barely possible, but Lynne’s grin grew even wider. She leaned in and kissed Seven on the cheek. “You’re the best.”

“True,” said Seven modestly, and Lynne laughed.

“Okay, make yourself comfortable. Wait in the shuttle if you want.”

Seven waved the shuttle off. “No, thank you. I’m enjoying the air.”

“Really?” Lynne had been ready to launch herself over again, but now she paused. “Did I just hear you say that?”

“I never had a true basis for comparison before. But when we beamed back yesterday, I was able to detect a qualitative difference between the air in the ships, and the air on Gretchen’s farm. And I much prefer the air on her farm.” Seven sniffed appreciatively. “But I prefer this more. You were correct, mountains have a distinctive odor.”

Lynne grinned again. “They do. And they smell even more fantastic in the summer, in a whole different way. Warm and dry and piney.” She shoved her poles in the snow, tensed her body—and stopped. “Seven? Do you think you could live in a place like this?”

Seven looked around at the snow-covered peaks carpeted in tall conifers, all pointing up to an intense blue sky. There was a quality of silence here that she had never before experienced, and she found it very appealing. And most of all, there was the air.

“Yes,” she said.

Lynne looked at her seriously, nodded once, and slipped over the edge. This time, daring fate halfway down, she performed a full backflip off a jump—a move apparently designed specifically to accelerate Seven’s heart rate. From far below, the tiny sound of her whoop floated up.

Seven unfolded a tarp, laid it on the snow and sat down. This was going to take some time.
Kathryn wrapped up her speech in the main square of São Paulo, waved at the sea of cheering people, and gratefully stepped off the stage into the shade. “Oh, thank you,” she said to the young ensign who was already holding out a cold drink with a straw protruding. “Mm! What is this?”

“Iced coffee,” said the ensign. “It’s a specialty around here.”

“I think I may come here more often,” mumbled Kathryn, sucking down a quarter of the glass. “God, that’s good.”

The ensign beamed, clearly thrilled to have made her happy. “I also have a message for you from Admiral Necheyev.” He handed over a PADD. Without taking her lips from the straw, Kathryn thumbed the PADD and promptly stopped breathing. The text message was short and sweet; five simple words that took the last burden of her Voyager captaincy off her shoulders.

The Council voted in favor.

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“Shouldn’t you be doing this with Kathryn?” asked Seven.

Lynne settled the hovercraft in the clearing and powered down the engines. “Kathryn’s in Brazil, and she’s got engagements all over the world for the rest of the week. You and I are here, right now, and this is the time. I haven’t been able to even think of doing this before now.”

“Would waiting four more days make that much of a difference?”

Lynne had already opened the door on her side. “Yes, it would.” She got out and closed the door.

With a shrug, Seven followed. The late afternoon light slanted through the pines, highlighting the patches of snow on the ground. They were at a much lower elevation, and she found the environmental differences intriguing. The trees were larger, the temperature higher, the snow only patchy instead of a uniform thick blanket of white…and it smelled different as well. She inhaled deeply, trying to analyze the variables.

“It’s the temperature,” said Lynne, watching her. “It’s warmer, and that allows different scents to be released. The air turns more pure when it’s colder. Personally, I love the richness down here.”

“I never truly valued my olfactory sense until we came to Earth,” said Seven. “It has been a revelation.”
Lynne smiled. “After a lifetime in space, I can imagine. Come on, let’s see how much things have changed in three hundred and seventy-seven years.”

“Besides the absence of the town?” Seven fell in beside her as they began walking upslope along a stream.

“Yeah, that was a surprise. Though it shouldn’t be; that town only existed to serve the ski resort, and I suspect skiing wasn’t high on most people’s list when World War Three broke out and Denver was bombed.”

“It seems odd that the roads are gone as well,” said Seven. “Even without a town, the roads would still have served travelers through the mountains. And even if they had been abandoned immediately, how could there be so few signs after less than four centuries?”

“Because we sucked at road building. The Romans built for the centuries. We built for a couple of years. No, seriously,” she said in response to Seven’s look of skepticism. “We used a soft blend of tar, sand, and crushed rocks. Not exactly weather impermeable. People always thought of it as a hard surface, but when I was a kid, in really hot weather I’d go out and stick my pocketknife into the road just to watch it stand on end.”

“Your roads changed viscosity with normal air temperatures?” Seven found this incomprehensible.

“Yeah. Soft in the summer and brittle in winter. Water got in during the winter and froze.”

“Which would cause fissures and heaving.”

“Right. Our roads had to be repaved every few years or they became practically impassable.”

“How could such an inefficient method stay in use?”

“Because in the short term it was cheap, and that’s all anyone cared about. So you can imagine what just a hundred years would do, let alone four centuries. I know there are still a lot of the old roads in hot, arid places like the southwest, but up here? No way. Too much weather and too many plants tearing things up.” She paused, looking down at the stream, which was now being joined by a smaller rivulet from the north. “Okay, is this Beaver Creek or Spencer Creek?”

Seven kept silent, giving Lynne the time she needed to find her bearings. She had never, not once in her life, attempted to walk through unmarked land without a tricorder or similar instrument. Lynne was
doing this from memory, with no navigational aids, and in a place where most of her remembered landmarks had long vanished.

“I think it’s Spencer,” Lynne decided. “In which case…” She waded the stream and motioned Seven over. “We need to go up that ridge.”

“Now I understand,” said Seven. “You didn’t want to drag Kathryn all over the countryside while attempting to find your way.”

“I knew you’d figure it out.”

As it turned out, the rivulet had been Beaver Creek, and they’d had to backtrack to the first stream, go uphill another kilometer, and then strike off to the northwest again. This time they topped a ridge that looked into a small valley, and Lynne clutched Seven’s hand. “God, Seven, this is it,” she said in a hushed voice. Letting go, she set off at a brisk pace, cutting straight down the ridge in long strides. Seven chased after her, and by the time they reached the bottom Lynne was running.

They ran halfway across the valley floor, with Seven unable to close the gap until Lynne suddenly stopped, turning in circles and looking around with an almost despairing air. “It’s here, I know it, but everything’s so different…”

Seven looked around as well, wanting to help, willing herself to find something to take that look off Lynne’s face. After the joy she’d seen earlier today, this was hard to watch. She moved off a few steps, scanning the area, and then paused as her optical implant picked up an unnaturally straight line of rocks. They were buried under brush, but still noticeable in the infrared due to their radiation of heat from the day’s sun. “Lynne?” she said hesitantly. “Is this what you’re looking for?”

Lynne followed her, not seeing anything until Seven began pulling back the brush.

“Oh,” she breathed, and joined Seven in pulling the brush. “Oh, my god, my god…” With her bare hands she began digging, first slowly and then, as more rocks were exposed, with an energy that bordered on the frantic. Throwing the damp soil in all directions with a total lack of concern for her own clothing, she soon uncovered an unmistakable right angle. The manic energy left her body and she sat down quite suddenly, wiping her cheek with the back of her dirty hand. “Seven—” Her voice cracked. “It’s the fireplace.”

Seven crouched beside her, not quite as willing as Lynne to let the
dampness soak into her pants. “Where was the fireplace?” she asked gently.

Tears were coursing down Lynne's cheeks, but when she looked at Seven she was smiling. “In the living room. We’re sitting in my parents’ living room. The kitchen was there—” she pointed — “and the utility room was over there, and our bedrooms were upstairs.” She let out a laugh, a half-strangled sound that seemed on the verge of a sob.

“Seven, I’m home.”
Alison took her plate to the kitchen table along with her PADD. The news she’d downloaded was all about the Council’s vote for amnesty, and she was enjoying reading the varied political opinions on how it had come about, which factors had swayed which members, and why Gutierrez had suddenly taken a stand for the greater good. Overall, public opinion was certainly in Gutierrez’ favor, which made Alison snicker. If people only knew what went on behind closed doors.

The beep from her terminal startled her, setting her heart beating at an unreasonably rapid pace. She hurried to the panel and felt instantly depressed upon reading the FedComm ID. Though she was always happy to talk to Lynne, that wasn’t the name she’d been waiting two days to see. Where was Elise?

With a sigh, she accepted the call—and smiled in spite of herself at the view that greeted her. “I thought you were skiing, not rolling in mud.”

Lynne swiped at her face and grinned. “We just got back to the hovercraft from a little hike. I found my parents’ house!”

“You’re kidding! It’s still there?”

“The base of the fireplace is. I suppose if I went in there with a phaser I could see if the foundation is still intact, but…I don’t need to. Look.” She held up a rock with palpable pride. “This is my history. I’m taking it
home. I can’t believe it, Alison. It was incredible. I just sat down in the
dirt and laughed and cried.”

“Oh, so your ass is as muddy as your face?” Alison’s prior bad mood
had vanished.

“Wet, too.” Lynne winked. “Want to see?”

Laughing, Alison declined. “I’m sure it’s lovely, but that sort of thing
is really Kathryn’s province.”

“No, Seven saw it too.” Lynne was practically giddy. “I’m going to dig
up every one of those rocks, and when Kathryn and I decide where to live,
I’m building a new house and laying a fireplace with them.”

“Then you’ll never, ever be able to sell that house.”

“No way.”

Alison didn’t know where they came from, but the words were out of
her mouth before she could stop them. “Let me design it for you?”

“The house?”

“Yes. I did mine, and I had such a good time doing it. It would be fun to
do yours, too.”

“Shit, Alison, I didn’t know you designed your house! It’s beautiful!”

“Thank you,” Alison said modestly. “But you actually haven’t seen
most of it.” A thought occurred to her. “Hey. You’re in the area, right?”

“Yeah, we’re about a twenty-minute flight away.”

“Come over. I’m not doing anything, and you could get the house tour.
And maybe clean up a little before you go home and try to kiss your
poor wife.”

“I’d love to. Wait—hang on. Seven? Feel like a detour past Alison’s
house?” She looked back. “Seven’s game. We’ll pop by. We can’t stay long,
though—Gretchen’s babysitting Barney and I promised to be home for the
evening feeding. He took solid food this morning, by the way.”

“Your baby is growing up. I’d better get to see him before he stops
being a kitten.”

“Come over whenever you want to. Having guests isn’t nearly so diffi-
cult as it used to be.”

They signed off, and fifteen minutes later she was just dropping her
dish into the replicator when the security perimeter alarm beeped.
Congratulating herself on her good timing, she hit the video feed to make
sure it was her guests and not a reporter. The face that appeared on the
screen nearly stopped her heart.
“Hi, Alison,” said Elise. “Sorry to drop by without warning, but...can I talk to you?”

“Ah...yes, of course. But check behind you, I’ve got Lynne and Seven on their way.”

She seemed a little crestfallen at this news. “I’m sorry. It was rude of me not to call first. Why don’t I just go home and—”

“Elise,” said Alison firmly, “get in here. They’re only staying for a short while.” *I’m hoping you’ll stay longer.*

“Okay. I’ll be right in.”

Alison scrambled upstairs to brush her teeth and was back down again just as the chime rang. She opened the door and paused, simply letting herself enjoy the beauty of Elise Hamilton standing on her porch. “Hi,” she said. “Come in out of the cold.”

Elise stepped inside as Alison shut the door behind her. “I know I should have called—”

“Are you all right?” Alison interrupted.

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Did you come here to tell me you need some space?”

Elise blinked. “No...”

“Good.” Alison stepped right into her and drew her down for the kiss she’d been thinking about for two days. It was gentle and loving, and as Elise relaxed into it, Alison just barely slid the tip of her tongue across a soft upper lip. Elise jerked, then intensified her embrace and put a hand on the back of Alison’s head, holding her very firmly in place as she let Alison know precisely what that did to her.

The perimeter chime broke them apart, panting a little. “Hold that thought,” said Alison. “I plan to pick that up again just as soon as we can.”

Elise could only nod as Alison went to the panel. “Hi, ladies. Come on in.” She dropped the security field, watched the hovercraft cross it and reactivated the field. Two steps took her back to Elise’s arms. “That gives us about three minutes to finish saying hello.”

This time Elise was ready for her, and they managed to pack a lot into three minutes. By the time the door chime rang, Alison was seriously regretting her invitation for the house tour, but she ran her fingers through her hair and prepared to make the best of it.

Opening the door, she took one look at Lynne and started to laugh.
“You weren’t kidding, were you? I’m not sure I should let you in my house.”

“I brushed most of it off,” Lynne said. “What’s left is stuck to me, so you should be safe.”

Alison stepped back. “If anything falls off, you’re picking it up. Hi, Seven, how was the skiing?”

“Very good,” said Seven as she entered. “I’m making progress.”

“She’s being modest,” said Lynne, coming in behind her. “Seven’s one of the most natural skiers I’ve ever known.” Her eyes went past Alison and widened slightly. “Elise! I wondered who that hovercraft belonged to. Did you get some thinking done?”

Alison closed the door and turned in time to see an almost comically startled look on Elise’s face.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I got quite a lot of thinking done. Did Alison tell you that was what I was doing?”

“No, she just said you were out of touch. I read between the lines. I’ve been doing some thinking today, too.”

Elise finally smiled. “Thinking for you involves skiing and mud?”

“Mostly it just involves getting the hell out. I’ve been trapped like a rat in a cage.”

“Sounds familiar,” Elise agreed. “Though I have to say, my cage was an extremely pleasant one.” She shot a look at Alison.

“Okay, let’s do the cage tour,” said Alison. “Those boots are coming off, Lynne. Seven, you too.”

Her guests obediently took off their boots, while Alison tried very hard not to be overly sensitized to Elise’s presence next to her. The jangling along her nerves faded as she conducted the tour, settling into hostess mode as Seven, of all people, began asking specific questions about why she’d chosen certain angles and heights. Alison had never heard the woman talk this much in all the times she’d seen her, so it was a surprise to find herself fielding this flow of questions. It was immediately apparent that Seven had the mind of a mathematician, along with spectacular spatial awareness. While Lynne understood the general impressions Alison had tried to evoke in her design, Seven understood precisely how she’d attained them. By the time they finished up the tour in the conservatory, Seven announced that she would like to design her own home, too.

“Before or after the wedding?” teased Lynne.
“Seven, you’re engaged?” Elise asked.

“Yes. Revi and I were engaged six months ago. I wanted to be married right away, but she insisted on a waiting period. We have six months left to go.”

Alison frowned. “How did I not know this?”

“Because you never asked?” Seven offered.

As the others laughed, Alison shook her head. “All right, I deserved that one. But some people, who shall remain unnamed but with whom I have been spending a great deal of time lately, could have mentioned this little fact to me.”

“Ah, but that’s Seven and Revi’s business, not mine,” said Lynne.

“Where is the wedding going to be?” asked Elise.

“I don’t know.” Seven seemed puzzled. “We haven’t discussed it.”

“You only have six months to plan a wedding and you haven’t discussed it?” Elise was astonished.

Seven turned to Lynne in confusion. “How long do we require? You planned yours in ten days.”

“Ten days?” repeated Alison and Elise in unison.

“Well, it’s not like we had to reserve a reception hall and hire a caterer,” said Lynne defensively. “We just had to pick out a decent unoccupied planet and replicate enough food and drinks for the crew.”

“So you just, what, beamed down to a planet, got married and then flew off?” asked Elise.

“Not exactly. We landed the ship and spent five days doing a complete overhaul. Then we got married, right there in the field beneath the ship.”

“And then the crew had two weeks of shore leave,” Seven added. “But they were confined to one of the planet’s two continents. Lynne and Kathryn had the other for their honeymoon.”

“You had an entire continent for your honeymoon?” Alison couldn’t wrap her mind around it, and had to laugh instead. “You really know how to show a girl a good time.”

“Alison,” said Lynne in a slow drawl, “you don’t know the half of it.”

The tone of voice reminded all of Alison’s nerve endings about the good time they might be having, if only they were alone with the object of their interest. It took an immense force of will not to look at Elise, though Lynne’s knowing smile indicated that her effort was showing on the surface. She shot Lynne an exasperated look.
“Will it take longer than ten days to plan a wedding here?” asked Seven.

“That depends on how much stress you’d like to achieve, the longer you can take planning it. Come on, Seven, I have a kitten to feed and you need to talk to Revi about weddings and houses...and maybe think about a proposal I’d like to pitch at you.” Mercifully, Lynne began to lead them back toward the door, while Alison tried to maintain her hostess manners and not look as eager for their departure as she actually was. She thought she was home free when her guests were putting on their boots, but Lynne suddenly stopped and said, “Oh! I forgot why I called you in the first place—the amnesty!”

Now Alison felt guilty. “I can’t believe I didn’t say anything. I was reading the news when you called. Lynne, congratulations, that is so wonderful. I know how much this means to you.”

“It means even more to one of my best friends. And to Kathryn; she’s never been able to really relax about being home until now. Well, aside from the...anyway, she called from São Paulo and god, she was so happy. It was pretty cute.” She smiled, then shook her head and added, “But that’s not why I was calling. I wanted to invite you to the party.”

“That’s right, the party’s on now. Where will you have it?”

“On Voyager. Kathryn already got permission from Starfleet. We’re going to decorate the shuttle bay, and have the doors wide open with the view of San Francisco, and let our hair down. No admirals and no speeches. And since you were right there with me for all of this, I think you should join us for the celebration. Besides which, you’re the reason that ship is sitting in San Francisco instead of floating in a billion pieces somewhere in the Delta Quadrant. A lot of my friends are going to want to meet the woman who saved their asses.”

Not sure she wanted that kind of attention, Alison said, “It sounds like a great party, but—”

“Please don’t say no.” Having finished strapping on her second boot, Lynne rose to her full height, pinning Alison with a serious gaze. “They deserve the chance to thank you.”

“I agree,” said Seven. “Parties are not my favored activity either, but this is one neither Revi nor I would miss. I would hope to see you there.”

“Alison, are you kidding, you have to go!” said Elise. “After what you did, you’re just going to fade into the background now? I agree with
Lynne and Seven; that crew deserves the chance to thank you to your face.”

Alison sighed. “When will it be?”

“Saturday, sixteen hundred hours. Enough time to enjoy the sight of San Francisco in daylight, and then watch night fall. Live music and dancing,” Lynne added in an encouraging tone.

“Do I get to bring a guest?”

“Of course.”

She turned to Elise. “Will you come?”

Caught, Elise said, “Oh, I don’t think that would be appropriate.”

“Why not?”

“Because my mom’s the one you saved them from! I think that party’s the last place I should be.”

“That is completely illogical,” said Seven. “Not only are you not responsible for your mother’s actions, but you directly enabled yesterday’s mission. Lynne is free right now because of you.”

“Damn straight,” Lynne agreed. “So knock that shit off and come to the party. If you won’t come as Alison’s guest, then come at my personal invitation.” As Elise hesitated, she added, “Please.”

Their eyes locked, and Alison wasn’t quite sure what passed between them, but Elise finally nodded. “Okay. I’ll come. Is it formal?”

“Slightly. Dress uniforms.” Lynne got a wicked smile on her face.

“Mostly because I want to see Kathryn in hers.”

“I don’t understand your fascination,” said Seven. “Kathryn has been wearing her dress uniform to every one of her speeches and appearances. If anything, she has been wearing it more often than her standard uniform. If the appeal is based on rarity, then you should be getting excited about her standard uniform instead.”

“And exactly how many of those speeches and appearances have I been able to attend? Besides, those are different.”

“Why?”

“Because she wasn’t wearing the uniform for me.” Lynne reached around her to open the door. “I’m really glad you’re both coming. Thanks for saying yes. Alison, don’t forget to give Elise the PADD.”

They exchanged their goodbyes, and Alison closed the door with considerable relief. She tapped the auto-release command on her security panel—which would drop the field for any craft approaching from the
inside, then automatically raise it again—and turned to Elise. “God, I feel guilty.”

“Why?”

“Because when I invited them over, I really wanted them to come. And the moment you appeared on that screen, I really wanted them to stay the hell away. I’m such a bad hostess.”

Elise smiled. “Not in my experience. So what was that about the PADD?”

“Right.” Alison snapped her fingers and went into the kitchen, where her briefcase was still sitting on the chair. “Now it’s just a question of which one...aha.” She pulled out the PADD and handed it to Elise.

Activating it, Elise quickly scanned the file, then raised her eyes to Alison’s. “She reinstated me.”

“She reinstated all of you.”

Elise sagged into the nearest chair. “Well, fuck.”

Puzzled, Alison said, “Somehow I thought you’d be happier.”

“It’s just...it was all for nothing. So much damage for nothing at all.”

Elise slid the PADD onto the table. “This actually hurts. It’s proof that Mom was wrong in every way.”

“I don’t think Lynne meant it quite that way.”

“I know.” Elise rubbed her face and leaned back against the chair. “Well, I wish I’d had the chance to thank her before she left.”

“You can call her. You could go visit. For that matter, we could both go visit. I want to see her kitten.”

“She has a kitten?”

“She rescued it. They found it nearly dead in Ms. Janeway’s barn. She’s been bottle feeding him for a week, but she said he took solid food for the first time today.”

“So the big bad threat to my future rescues kittens. And bottle feeds them.” Elise shook her head. “Oh, the irony.”

Alison leaned against the table facing her, close enough so that their legs were touching, and crossed her arms over her chest to keep them out of trouble. It looked like they needed to get a few things out of the way. “I’m really glad you’re here,” she said.

“I’m glad to be here.”

“Did the thinking help?”
“Yes. A little bit. I just had to get away from Denver, and everything that’s been going on.”

“Including me, hm?” She could understand that, though it didn’t exactly feel good.

Elise didn’t correct her. “I felt like I’d imposed long enough. You brought me home for an overnight stay and ended up with a slightly hysterical guest for the entire weekend, including a delightful visit to the Detention Center.”

“Did I ever give you the impression that you were a burden?”

“No, but as I said, you’re a gracious hostess.”

“I’m not usually a hostess at all.” Alison let that sink in. “What was it that you wanted to talk about? You said that’s why you came.”

Elise reached out to touch her leg, rubbing her hand lightly over the fabric. “Right. I, ah...whoo.” She laughed nervously. “This was a lot easier when I was alone in my cabin.”

“Maybe you should just pretend I’m not here,” Alison suggested.

“That wouldn’t help at all. I need you to be here. I just...” She paused, her eyes going to the hand resting on Alison’s leg. With a final squeeze, she put her hand back in her lap and looked up. “My whole life got turned upside down this week. And you held me together. Part of me is looking at you and seeing a rock in the whirlpool, a place I can hold onto. And part of me is thinking that’s not fair to you at all. You don’t need someone clinging to you.”

“I’ve known you for a long time,” said Alison. “Not so intimately, of course, but you can tell a lot about a person from the way they live their lives. And I have never thought of you as a person who would cling.”

“I never had a reason to. But I would have happily stayed here for another week, because it’s been so easy with you. Too easy—I really didn’t want to leave. Which is why I did.”

“Wait a minute. You left because you didn’t want to leave?” Now that was some twisted logic.

“I meant to go home, and get back to my life and out of your hair. So that when I saw you again, it wouldn’t be as your hysterical guest. It would be as me.”

This made slightly more sense. She motioned for Elise to continue.

“So I walked in my house and found the mess from cribbage night still sitting there. It was like Miss Havisham’s table—a perfect line between
the life I had before, and the one I have now. Picking up that mess was almost metaphorical. And then I found the one hundred and sixty-eight requests for interviews on my comm unit, and the security panel started to chime before I’d even finished looking at them...and I packed up and got the hell out. I couldn’t think there. I had five goddamned reporters chasing me when I went through the security field. I finally dumped them by flying straight to the Detention Center, if you can believe it. They beamed me to the transport center and I went to our family cabin in Maine. I haven’t even been home yet.”

“That explains why you didn’t return my calls.”

“You called me?”

“I can’t believe you’re surprised at that. Of course I called you. I was worried about you.” That was clearly not the right thing to say, so she hastily added, “And I wanted to see you.”

“I thought you’d appreciate the break.”

“Elise, for God’s sake. I missed you. I was a little hurt that you didn’t call me for almost two days.” She saw the impact of that and shook her head. “Okay, I see what’s going on here. And I understand why you’d feel the need to regain a position of strength. I guess the difference between you and me is that I didn’t see you as losing that strength in the first place. Miss Havisham never picked up the mess.”

A light dawned in Elise’s eyes. “No, she didn’t. Actually I never figured out how she could stand the sight of that rotting cake.”

“Right. That’s not your style, and it’s not you. You don’t have to prove yourself to me, and I don’t need a break. So can we just acknowledge that we’ve got something special happening here, and that neither one of us wants to back away from it?”

The light grew brighter. “Yes. Happily, on my end.”

“Good. Is that what you needed to talk about?”

Elise dropped her gaze. “Uh...not all of it, no.” She took a deep breath. “That something special you mentioned? I’ve never had anything like it before. And I don’t want to fuck it up. So I thought I’d better tell you right from the start that I don’t know what I’m doing. I know how to be a great date, and I know how to give a woman what she wants. You were totally right when you said I was used to being the dominant one in my relationships. But—” she gave Alison a knowing look— “that is obviously not going to fly with you. You’re out of my comfort zone, which
intrigues the hell out of me and scares me to death, all at the same time.”

Alison waited to see if anything else was coming, but Elise was looking at her expectantly. “Okay,” she began. “Then I have just two things to say. One, you’re out of my comfort zone as well, in a whole lot of ways. But that’s how I know this is special.”

Elise blinked. “I never thought about it that way.”

“You thought you were the only one a little scared of this?” Alison didn’t even need an answer to that one; it was written all over Elise’s face.

“Well…you seem so sure of yourself.”

“I’m sure of myself. I’m just not sure of you. Which is why not hearing from you for two days was hard for me.”

“Oh.” Clearly this was taking some processing. “Well, so far I’m not getting any points for knowing what you’re thinking. I really thought I should give you some breathing room.”

“Will you trust me to tell you if I need that? Then you won’t have to guess what I’m thinking.”

“Okaaay,” said Elise doubtfully. “But I have to tell you, that’ll be new for me.” In a lower voice, almost to herself, she added, “Who am I kidding, this is all new for me.”

Alison considered that. “When was the last time you worried about whether a lover needed breathing space?”

“Um…never. Because I was always the one who needed it.”

“That’s what I thought.” Alison was beginning to realize that Elise had been the dominant one in more ways than just sexual. No wonder this was tying her up in knots.

“What about you?” asked Elise.

“I haven’t worried about it too much either. Until now, for some odd reason.”

Elise smiled, her confidence visibly improved. “Will you trust me to tell you if I need that?”

“I trust you,” said Alison, answering a question that hadn’t been asked.

Elise looked at her for a long, silent moment, then nodded. “All right, what’s the second thing?”

This was much easier, and Alison couldn’t stop the smile as she said,
“The second thing is, I happen to think your ability to give a woman what she wants is a definite bonus.”

She saw that hit right where she’d intended, and it took Elise a moment to recover her equilibrium.

“So…we’re on the same page?” Elise asked.

“I believe so, yes. And we have a quorum, so anything we decide here is valid and actionable.”

With a chuckle, Elise said, “Suddenly I’m envisioning you, me and a boardroom table in a whole different way.”

Alison didn’t laugh. She couldn’t, because all of the air had suddenly been sucked out of the room. All she could do was watch as her own thoughts were mirrored in those mesmerizing gray eyes. Without another word, Elise shifted her legs apart and tugged Alison between them. Slowly she pulled Alison’s shirt out from her pants, pushed up the fabric and laid a very soft kiss on the skin of her stomach. “A bonus,” she murmured, looking at the skin she’d exposed and lightly drawing her fingers across it. Alison shivered. “Let’s make a deal, shall we? Since we’re on the same page, how about I do what I want, and we’ll see if you want it too.”

“Deal.” Her knees went weak as Elise pressed her lips right in the curve of her waist.

“Good. Because I’ve been thinking about this quite a lot today.”

Alison jerked in surprise as Elise’s fingers went to her waistband and unfastened her pants. Apparently they were getting right to the point, but she wasn’t about to object. “Just today?” she managed. “You’re behind the times.”

But no, Elise wasn’t getting to the point. She was simply exposing the rest of Alison’s stomach, and exploring every centimeter of it with her lips and tongue, all with the utmost gentleness and a total lack of urgency. Sweet Jesus, how did she know that felt so good? Alison couldn’t remember another lover ever spending so much time on a non-erogenous zone. She didn’t even consider her stomach to be that sexy. Perhaps she’d have to reconsider that opinion, given the way Elise was touching her.

All that concentration on one area must have heightened her sensitivity elsewhere, because she nearly jumped out of her skin when Elise locked eyes with her and slid one hand up her torso and between her breasts, stopping on her upper chest and holding it there. Instinctively Alison laid her own hand on top, feeling the warmth through her shirt. It
was an astonishingly intimate gesture, a connection she hadn’t expected, and for several seconds neither of them moved. Then Elise brought her hand back down, held Alison firmly by her sides, and slowly rose to her feet. Their mouths came together before she even finished standing, and this time when Alison touched her tongue to Elise’s lips she was granted immediate entry. They explored each other with a shared intensity, neither one taking or giving control, and Alison began to understand what Elise had meant by what she wanted.

As if hearing her thoughts, Elise broke off the kiss while wrapping her arms around Alison and squeezing tightly. “You feel wonderful, just like this. I want this to take a long, long time.”

“So do I.” Alison kissed the side of her jaw, her cheek, and then gently sucked on the lobe of her ear, smiling to herself at the sharp intake of breath. She let go, moved just above the ear, and whispered, “This is good?”

“God!” Elise gripped her even more tightly. “Yes, it’s good.”

“Mmm,” Alison purred, without moving a millimeter. “I think I’ve discovered something.” Elise twitched, and Alison gave herself a mental thumbs up. If merely putting her mouth to Elise’s ear and speaking could produce that strong an effect, what would happen if she used her tongue?

When she made contact, Elise turned to gelatin. “Alison…oh my God, that’s deadly. I’m not…” Ducking her head, she squirmed away from Alison’s touch, already breathing hard. “Okay. Enough. I won’t be able to stand up.”

“Then maybe we should go upstairs.”

When Elise nodded, Alison took her by the hand and led her out. They made it halfway up the stairs before she decided she couldn’t wait quite that long and stopped for a kiss along the way. Being a step above gave her a height advantage which she instantly put to use as she captured Elise’s lips and ran her hands through her soft hair. Breaking off the kiss, she tilted her head to watch her fingers combing the black strands, fascinated by a color so different from her own. “I think black is my new favorite color,” she said.

Elise smiled. “I’ve discovered a sudden partiality for blond, myself.”

“Eh. Blond is so common. But a real black like yours…”

“Is incredibly common in most of the world. Not to mention Vulcan, and Betazed, and—” She was unable to finish the sentence as Alison
kissed her, and by the time this one ended, she’d apparently forgotten whatever it was she’d meant to say. Alison took further advantage of her location to try out her new favorite technique, once again reducing Elise to a boneless state as she nibbled on her ear. It really was remarkable, the instant effect this had on Elise’s breathing.

Elise suddenly straightened, pulling away from Alison’s teasing tongue and stepping up beside her. A moment later Alison found herself against the wall, with an extremely passionate woman kissing her as if her very life depended on it. Warm hands were sliding up her back, her bra was deftly unsnapped, the hands slid back to rest on the sides of her breasts… and then Elise stopped, pulling her head back as she tried to get her breathing under control. “I thought you wanted this to take a long time!”

“I did. I do.” Alison was having difficulty with speech.

“Then you can’t do that to me. Just...you can’t.” Elise laughed helplessly. “I’ve always been sensitive there, but good lord, not like this!” She suddenly seemed to notice where her hands were resting. “Oh, God...” With the look of a woman voluntarily giving up food and water for a week, she dropped her hands back to Alison’s waist and leaned their foreheads together. “I don’t want to do this on the stairs. But if you keep pushing me like that, we won’t make it to the bedroom.”

For her part, Alison wasn’t sure she approved of Elise’s sudden restraint. Those hands had felt very good right where they were, and she’d been eagerly anticipating their movement just a little further. “All right, I won’t do that anymore. But...” Her own hands slid up Elise’s shirt. “…the next time you touch me here, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t stop. In fact, I’d prefer it if...” She moved her hands in and cupped Elise’s breasts, gently squeezing.

Elise closed her eyes and let out a low sound of pure pleasure. “Okay, I get it. Bedroom?”

Alison released her, grabbed one of her hands, and practically dragged her the rest of the way up the stairs. At the top Elise stopped her for another kiss, this time wrapping both arms around her and holding her so tightly that Alison had very little room to maneuver—not that she particularly wanted to. It felt good being held like this, as if Elise didn’t ever want to let her go.

They finally managed to get through the bedroom doorway, where Alison paused long enough to set the environmental control for a tropical
level. Still holding Elise’s hand, she led her to the foot of the bed, gave her a scorching kiss, and reached for the hem of her own shirt. She wanted it off, and most of all she wanted that loose bra off. But Elise stopped her hands. “No. Let me.”

It was a little odd, and a little out of Alison’s experience. She wasn’t accustomed to being undressed. Not like this, not with such slow care. Passion she was used to. But this was almost maternal, and it made her uncomfortable until she realized that it wasn’t maternal, but a close cousin of it: nurturing. Elise was taking quiet care with her, making sure that nothing got caught and that she was never in an awkward position, and it changed the tone of their lovemaking. By the time Elise had slowly, gently drawn the bra down her arms and draped it over the shirt at the foot of the bed, Alison’s own passion had deepened into a need for a different kind of connection. She stepped into Elise and kissed her, holding her face with both hands, trying to communicate her new need in the only way she could. And when she pulled back to look into those gray eyes, she saw a true joy there. They were on the same page.

“Alison...” Elise’s smile was brilliant as she lightly ran her fingertips across Alison’s shoulders. “You are so, so beautiful. God, look at you.” She traced her collarbones, went down her arms to her fingertips, came back up again and paused. With that same perfect care, she slid her hands in to brush the undersides of Alison’s breasts, then cupped their weight as she stared. At last she bent down and pressed her lips to a sloping curve, so softly as to be almost indistinguishable from the touch of her fingertips. Gradually she kissed all around the breast and then, with a gentleness that liquified Alison’s spine, took the nipple into her mouth.

“Oh,” Alison whispered, her hand coming up behind Elise’s head to hold her in place. “That feels so good.”

In answer, Elise cupped the other breast and held its nipple between her forefinger and thumb, not squeezing but simply letting Alison know she was there. With both nipples being so sweetly attended to, Alison floated in a moment of perfect peace, watching the dark head at her breast and wondering exactly what she’d done to deserve something so beautiful.

Elise raised her head, covered the breast she had just left with her hand, and lightly trapped the now very erect nipple between two fingers as she switched sides and began all over again. She was just as unhurried
and gentle with this one, leaving Alison torn between never wanting it to stop, and dying to do the same thing to Elise. By the time Elise covered that breast and straightened, Alison’s need had very definitely shifted toward the latter.

“My turn,” she said throatily, putting her hands at the hem of Elise’s shirt. As she pulled it off, her eyes went straight to the bra. “Oh God. It’s the same one.”

“What?”

“Your bra.” Alison was already running her fingers over the swelling breasts so gorgeously framed by the lace. “It’s the one you wore last weekend. When I picked it up off the bathroom floor I thought I might pass out.” Elise’s chuckle did wonderful things to the breasts under her hands, and she smiled in delight. “Oh, it’s going to be a shame to take this off.”

“So you were swooning over my bra while I was in the shower? If only I’d known.”

“Oh, no.” Alison shook her head. “You weren’t ready. It wouldn’t have been like this. And I want it—” she slid the straps over Elise’s shoulders and cupped the now-bare skin— “...to be like this. Sweet Jesus, you’re stunning.” This was the bare shoulder that had so enticed her four days ago, but then it had been utterly out of reach. Now it was under her fingertips, the soft skin simply begging for her lips to touch it, and she happily complied. For long minutes she explored the most perfect upper body she had ever seen, kissing and caressing delicate collarbones, strong shoulders, and the border between lace and curved skin. There was something powerfully erotic about the lace still covering Elise’s breasts—and the knowledge that she could remove it whenever she wanted to. She fought a considerable internal battle over just when to do that, but soon her desire to see what lay beneath won out. As a compromise, she took as long as possible to peel the fabric away, her eyes riveted to the flesh being bared. When the dark nipples were finally revealed she stood immobile, staring at the loveliness until Elise distracted her by reaching behind her back and unsnapping the bra. The fabric fell away, now dangling from Alison’s hands, and she tossed it in the general direction of the bed without taking her gaze off the view in front of her. Her hands followed her eyes, caressing and gently squeezing, and then she could wait no longer.

Her eyes closed of their own accord when she wrapped her lips around
the first nipple. So soft...so perfect. Elise’s hands were on her back, moving over her shoulder blades, but when Alison began a light sucking she felt a hand shift to her head and hold her close. In mere seconds the nipple in her mouth had changed from sweet softness to something much firmer, and in response she marginally increased the force of her suction, wondering how much or how little Elise wanted. Then she smiled as the hand on her head applied a little more pressure. *That answers that question.*

After indulging herself a little longer, she released the nipple and paid proper attention to the rest of the breast, in particular the soft underside, then happily switched sides. This nipple was still soft and she savored it in her mouth, giving it only the barest of touches, trying to keep it soft as long as she could—which, of course, wasn’t long. Soon she was suckling more firmly, and then more firmly yet, testing the boundaries. When she tried a gentle bite, Elise gasped and jerked in her arms.

“Too much?” she murmured, not moving from her position.

“No, just...if you’re going to do that, I need to lay down.”

By way of answering, Alison took the nipple into her mouth again, reducing the pressure but not letting go as she relished the sensation. She could do this for hours, but there were other places to explore, and eventually she let go and began kissing her way down Elise’s stomach. When she reached the pants she swiftly unfastened them and pushed them off Elise’s hips.

“Sit down,” she said, nudging Elise the last few centimeters toward the bed. She had to spend a little too much time pulling off the boots, but once they were out of the way she eagerly drew off the pants, leaving Elise in nothing but a filmy pair of black underwear. Elise smiled up at her and then draped herself back on the bed, completely at ease as she waved at Alison’s pants.

“Those too,” she said. “I’ll watch.”

“Voyeur.”

“Mm hm. Get used to it.” Elise didn’t watch so much as she ogled while Alison got her own shoes and pants off, then raised her eyebrows as the underwear followed. “You might have asked if I wanted the honor,” she said.

“I wasn’t expecting this tonight,” Alison answered, straightening up and smiling at the picture Elise made on her bed. “So I didn’t have my Starfleet undies on.”
Elise burst out laughing. “I want those next time!”
“You can have whatever you want next time.”

The amusement faded into desire as Elise stared at her nakedness. “Can I have what I want now?”
“That might depend on what it is.” Though Alison didn’t think there was anything Elise could want that she wouldn’t be willing to give.

Instead of answering, Elise sat up and crooked a finger, parting her legs as Alison walked over to stand between them. The bed was higher than the kitchen chair had been, putting Elise’s face on a level with Alison’s breasts—a position she quickly made the most of. She also took advantage of the bare skin now available to her, eagerly sliding her hands over Alison’s back and buttocks as she kissed, teased and suckled. Alison’s eyes closed from the sheer pleasure of it, but she soon opened them again, not wanting to miss a moment. Her hands couldn’t stay still either, and she marveled at the fact that she now had the right not only to look, but to touch. She wanted to do a great deal more touching.

Nudging Elise onto her back, she moved onto the bed as well, positioning herself on all fours. Her intent had been to take a more active turn, but she stopped when she saw the look on Elise’s face. Those gray eyes were riveted to the breasts now hanging over her face, her lips were parted unconsciously, and her expression was one of such intense desire that Alison could do nothing else but give herself over to Elise’s need.

What followed was a severe test of her arm strength, as Elise took what she was offering with such focus and skill that Alison was barely able to stay up. There seemed to be a direct connection between her nipples and her clitoris, and every tug of Elise’s lips and teeth brought an instant response. Her hips began moving of their own accord, and Elise responded by bringing up a thigh between her legs. The first contact brought gasps from both of them.

“You’re so wet already,” whispered Elise in wonder.

Alison couldn’t stop herself from pushing back against Elise’s thigh, her head lifting as she instinctively tried to put pressure where it was most needed. “Of course I am,” she managed. “Christ! You’re killing me.”

She felt hands on her hips, holding and steadying her as she moved, and when she looked down Elise was watching her with something approaching worship. It gave her pause—this was more than simply enjoying the moment. It was much more than Elise knowing how to give
a woman what she wanted. This was something altogether different, and she slowed her movements as their eyes locked.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever known,” Elise said quietly. She pressed her leg further, overbalancing Alison and forcing her to tip forward, which was fine with her. As she came down she slid her arms around Elise’s back, meeting her in a kiss that merged passion with emotion. There was so much she needed to say, but words were inadequate, even if she’d been capable of thinking that coherently. Instead she poured her feelings into a series of slow, deep kisses, but soon even that wasn’t enough. She wanted to touch every bit of Elise’s face with her lips, showing her in the most intimate way how much she’d come to mean to her. Elise lay passively beneath the rain of kisses, accepting the intimacy with a tiny, sweet smile. When Alison finally drew back, Elise opened her eyes and said, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For me, either.” Alison gave her an arch look. “Told you we had something special.”

“I never argued.” Elise touched a palm to the side of Alison’s face, then ran a gentle thumb over her lips. “I need to feel you,” she said. “All of you. Let me get the rest of the way up.”

Alison broke their contact and moved aside, giving Elise space to scoot up until her entire body was on the bed. The moment she was in place, Alison was back on top, this time stretching her length out on Elise’s body.

“Oh, yes,” Elise murmured, wrapping her arms around Alison’s back. “Perfect. This is what I needed.”

Alison felt a little overwhelmed by so much contact, and was taken by surprise when Elise rolled them over, putting herself on top. “What...?”

“My turn,” Elise said, and proceeded to repeat Alison’s earlier performance, covering her face and throat with gentle kisses.

It was surprising just how good that felt. When she’d done it to Elise, it had been instinctive, a simple expression of emotion. Being on the receiving end was altogether different. Having Elise touching her so gently, so lovingly, was an almost spiritual experience. Was there anything more profound than accepting kisses on her eyelids, of all places? To entrust such a delicate, vulnerable part of herself to another was some-
thing she’d never done before, nor had she ever given it any thought. But there was far more intimacy in this than in any sexual activity she could think of.

When Elise had kissed every centimeter of her jawline and throat, she changed tactics, moving her mouth to the soft part of Alison’s throat and gently sucking. To her own surprise, Alison jerked in response and her breathing suddenly increased. She’d had no idea that this was a turn-on for her, but her body certainly knew.

Elise raised her head and smiled. “I think I’ve discovered something.”

“Me too.” Alison couldn’t believe her response. “Jesus. It’s like an electric shock.”

“Really?” Elise tried it again, with the same result. “Ooo. I like this.” She looked down, smoothing her finger over skin that now felt very warm. “Do you have a dermal regenerator?”

“Yes, why? Do I already have a mark?”

“Mm hm. And you’re about to have a few more.” With that, Elise shifted into a different mode altogether. Gone was the gentle touch of a moment before; now she was after pure arousal. She went back to the same place and sucked hard, sending Alison into a state of near-instant incoherence. Her body was no longer under her control, and it could not stay still. How had she gone her whole life without knowing about this particular sensitivity?

By the time Elise finally released her, she was panting and clutching the duvet, astonished by her reaction and rapidly losing her ability to think. Elise gave her no time to recover as she moved to the opposite side of her throat and began all over again. Alison cried out as the suction started anew, her body bucking, and then she lost herself in the burning sensations. Her arousal was climbing to levels she’d never have thought possible, considering the fact that Elise wasn’t touching any of the areas that normally caused it.

When she was released again, there was only one coherent thought left in her head: she’d had enough of foreplay. With a roughness born of desperation she put a hand under Elise's chin and forced her to raise her head. “I need you,” she said urgently, and whatever was missing in verbal detail was certainly conveyed in her tone. Elise immediately shifted position, raising herself up and changing her angle. A moment later Alison felt the fingers at her entrance, but they weren’t moving
quickly enough and she simply couldn’t wait. Reaching down, she put her hand on top of Elise’s and pushed, filling herself immediately and moaning with the sheer relief of it. She ground her hips against Elise’s fingers, still holding her in place, and when she opened her eyes she saw Elise staring at their hands with an expression of almost shocked arousal.

“Don’t let go,” Elise whispered. “But let me do this.”

In her haze Alison didn’t know what she meant. She felt Elise pulling out and instinctively tried to hold her in. But at this angle she had no strength and her hand was carried along, until Elise pushed back in again…and then she understood.

Elise never took her eyes off their hands, watching with intense concentration as they worked together to give Alison what she so desperately wanted. And when the sharp, aching edge of need had been slightly dulled, Alison pulled her hand back, giving the reins to Elise and allowing herself to simply experience it.

As it turned out, Elise really did know how to give a woman what she wanted…or at least, what Alison wanted. She knew just how to curl her fingers, how to find the right speed, and somehow she even seemed to know when penetration ceased to be enough all by itself. Alison had barely registered the thought that she was craving more when Elise shifted, coming over her and taking her mouth in a bruising kiss. Alison wrapped her arms around her back and gave as good as she got, needing that connection, needing her close. She was distressed when Elise slipped away again, but when she felt the tug on her nipple she decided that this was good too. Very good. So good, in fact, that when all motion suddenly ceased she whimpered in dismay.

“Don’t stop…”

“I won’t,” Elise promised. “I just can’t wait any longer.”

She moved back, out of Alison’s reach, and the first touch of her tongue was almost painful in its exquisite intensity. She kept her fingers still, using her other hand to press on Alison’s stomach, opening her up to the gentle explorations. Slowly she ran her tongue up and down, down and up, finding all of Alison’s sensitive places—and there seemed to be a great number of them. Alison rested her hands on the back of Elise’s head, trying not to press down, but control was a tenuous thing at best when her body was strung as tightly as it was right now. She was by no
means a novice at this, but Elise was discovering things about her that she’d never known.

“You’re very sensitive right here,” Elise murmured. She flicked her tongue over the place in question, making Alison jerk and nearly lose control of her hands. Partly from a concern for Elise’s safety, she let go of her head and grabbed handfuls of the duvet instead.

“I can see that,” she managed.

Elise smiled up at her before returning her attention to her explorations. “And here…” Another swipe. “And over here.”

“God!”

“Actually,” mused Elise, “you’re so incredibly responsive that I might be able to make you come without ever touching your clitoris. Might be fun to try.”

“No. Not today.” Alison made her preference very clear, and Elise laughed softly.

“No. Not today.” And with that she moved to the one place Alison most needed her to be. Her talents were just as apparent in this area as they’d been in every other aspect of their lovemaking, and before long Alison was seeing stars. She was torn between wanting it to go on forever and wanting the relief of her orgasm, but as the pressure reached a nearly intolerable level, she decided on the latter. Unfortunately Elise now seemed to be avoiding the angle she needed for that to happen, repeatedly touching her just a hair outside the sweet spot, keeping her suspended in a state of painful anticipation. By now Alison knew enough about Elise’s skills to be certain this was intentional. But she had a little trick of her own up her sleeve, and instead of asking for what she wanted, she simply reached down and opened herself up with both hands.

Elise gave a soft gasp, lifting her head to look at the display before her, then staring up at Alison with that same expression of shocked arousal she’d shown when Alison had forced her hand in. Swallowing hard, she looked back down and said, “Do you have any idea how sexy that is?”

Fortunately, she didn’t seem to expect an answer, instead lowering her head and proving Alison’s suspicion correct by immediately focusing on the exact place she needed to be. Her fingers moved slowly, pumping in and out in a counter rhythm to her tongue, and soon Alison’s back was arching as her entire being hung suspended in the haze of pleasure Elise’s mouth and fingers were creating. She had no more thought, no more control, no ability
to do anything but wait for her release. And when the cascade began, and she
knew it could no longer be stopped, she cried out with the sheer agonizing
joy of it. A second cry was ripped from her throat as the orgasm swept over
her, immobilizing her spine before shaking her from head to foot, convulsing
her with aftershocks, and finally leaving her limp and drained. At last she let
go, dropping her hands to the bed and feeling sure she’d never move again.

“Jesus Christ in heaven,” she whispered, mostly to herself. “Holy
fucking God.”

Elise burst into laughter. “No, just me.”

“Oh, my God. Elise…” Alison had no words. “That was…that was…
oh, Christ.”

Elise began kissing her upper thighs, her stomach, her mound, and
then ventured a single soft lick in an area that was far too sensitive for it.
Alison jerked, grabbing her head none too gently. “No! No no no. I’m done.”

“Are you sure?”

“God, yes.” Alison released her, feeling guilty about the rough treat-
ment. “You’ve done me in.”

“Maybe you just need a little recovery time.” Elise turned her head and
planted another soft kiss on Alison’s thigh.

“Elise…” Alison laughed weakly. “I’m dead. I can’t have more
than one.”

“You can’t?” Elise looked disappointed. “Perhaps you never had a lover
who knew how to get you past that first wall.”

“No, believe me, I know myself. I don’t have multiple orgasms.”

Smiling up at her, Elise said, “Oh, I absolutely believe that you know
yourself. Of that I have no doubt at all. Okay then, I’m pulling
out. Ready?”

“Ready.” Alison clenched her teeth in anticipation, but the pullout
wasn’t nearly so difficult as she’d expected. “Ahh. That wasn’t bad.”

Elise came up beside her, propped up on one elbow. “That’s because
you were so incredibly wet. My God, Alison. You may not be multiorga-
smic, but the ones you have seem to be pretty outstanding.”

“They’re usually big,” Alison agreed, rolling over and tucking into her
body. “But not that big.”

“I think I’m envious. Mine don’t look like that.”
“How do you know? You’re inside them.” Alison closed her eyes, needing a rest after the exertion. Gentle fingers began tracing patterns on her back, and she smiled happily. “Mmm. That feels wonderful.”

“You were wonderful,” Elise whispered. “And so incredibly sexy.”

Alison fell into a warm, utterly comfortable space, basking in the sweet attention Elise was giving her. She felt cherished and protected, relaxed and snug, and it took her a few moments to realize just what her face was tucked into. As her brain came back online, she tilted her head slightly and took the nearest nipple into her mouth. A hiss from above her made her smile, and she let go just long enough to ask, “Did you think I was asleep?”

“No…” Elise’s breathing hitched as Alison resumed her activity. “I just thought you were wiped out.”

Alison tugged on the nipple with her teeth, enjoying the way Elise’s body jerked with the motion. “How could I possibly be wiped out with this in front of me?”

“It was…oh…a big orgasm.”

Hearing Elise trying to speak while aroused was so much fun that Alison was giving thought to asking her a whole series of questions, just for the enjoyment of making her stumble during the answers. In the end, she only asked one.

“How hard do you like it?”

“It de—oh, fuck—it depends. I’m so turned on now that…that you won’t be able to hurt me.” She gasped. “God!”

The last was from Alison biting down. She released the nipple, kissed it softly and asked, “Good God or ow God?”

“Good. Whoo. Very good. But that’s about as much as I want.”

Alison pushed up then, gently knocking Elise into her back. As she sat up, preparing a full assault, she was distracted by the sight of Elise’s underwear. “You’re still wearing these?” she asked incredulously.

“I had more important things to think about.”

“These have to come off.” Alison reached for the waistband.

“I know, but—wait! Just…be careful.” Elise looked pained. “I, um…got a little excited watching you.”

“Ohhh.” Alison looked more closely, seeing the telltale signs of one very aroused woman. “Hold on.” As Elise lifted her hips, she gently pulled
the soaking wet underwear away, sympathizing with the hiss she heard. “You really should have taken these off sooner.”

“Believe me, I know.” Elise dropped her head back as Alison drew the underwear the rest of the way off. “Oh, that’s much better.”

“Yes, it is,” said Alison fervently, tossing the garment off the bed without caring where it landed. She couldn’t take her eyes off the dark patch that had been revealed, nor the very clear evidence of just how much Elise had responded to their lovemaking. In fact, she was amazed that Elise had been able to hold her and touch her so sweetly when she had to be in a state of raging need.

Shifting back to the head of the bed, she straddled Elise and leaned down, kissing her hard before murmuring in her ear, “I think you need a little cleaning up.” She smiled at the gasp her voice elicited, reveling in the arms that came around her back and clutched her as she began nipping and sucking on the ear. “Actually I think you need a lot of cleaning up,” she added, running her tongue around the delicate shell. “So I could either spend an hour doing this to you, and every other kind of foreplay I can think of, or I could just get to work.” Elise’s fingernails dug into her back, putting her on notice that she was already driving her lover to the edge of control. “Which do you want?” she whispered.

If she’d thought Elise would beg, or even play her game, she’d underestimated her. In a rough but perfectly steady voice, Elise said, “I want you to take care of me.”

Alison lifted her head and met her eyes, her playfulness vanishing at the look she saw there. “Then I will,” she said seriously.

Much as she wanted to, she didn’t linger by the perfect breasts that tempted her. Elise needed her, and she wasted no time positioning herself between her legs, finding her lover swollen with arousal. She used a gentle, flat tongue, barely touching her, but it was still enough to make Elise jump and cry out. The next few swipes resulted in the same thing, and she was finally forced to wrap her arms around Elise’s upper thighs to hold her still. That gave her a better target, though it took considerable effort as Elise’s hips strained against her. Fingers tangled themselves in her hair, gripping almost painfully as she continued her slow, deliberate movements, licking up the signs of arousal. “You taste fantastic,” she said, her lips almost touching the skin, and was rewarded with a groan.

“Alison...”
Responding to the pleading tone, she abandoned her gentle explo-
rations and focused slightly higher, where she was not surprised—though considerably turned on—to find that Elise was rock hard. It felt like a small stone under her tongue, and there was absolutely no doubt where Elise needed her most. She spent several happy minutes experimenting with speed and pressure, figured out that Elise responded best to a medium speed with a hard tongue, and then promptly slowed down. Elise was too ready; she didn’t want this to end so soon. Perhaps it was a little cruel to the woman beneath her, but she was in paradise right now and wanted to stay there as long as she could.

Even so, it was going to end sooner than she wanted. Elise was simply too far gone, and every touch was sending her closer to the edge. Alison slowed, then slowed even more, but the muscles under her arms were shaking now and the fingers were tightening in her hair. The shaking increased, Elise’s hips drove upward, and Alison released her hold, freeing the thighs she’d held trapped. A moment later Elise exploded into orgasm, her body bucking as she cried out, and Alison did her best to stay with her until the fingers in her hair finally let go.

“Oh…okay…stop stop stop,” Elise gasped.

Alison lifted her head, looking down regretfully, then prepared to leave her paradise behind. But a much gentler hand on her head stopped her.

“That didn’t mean you should go,” Elise said, still breathing hard. “God, don’t go.”

Alison stared. “You mean…you’re not done?”

A weak chuckle answered her. “Oh, Alison. That just took the edge off.”

She couldn’t stop her grin. “You’re multiorgasmic.”

“Oh yes. Very.”

“Sweet Jesus on the cross.” She couldn’t believe her luck. “If I were still going to church I’d light a candle in gratitude.”

Elise laughed. “I don’t think they’d let you in the door anymore, honey. You’re about as profane as they come.”

“How many orgasms do you normally have?”

“It depends. Usually four or five. My record is ten.”

Alison stared, then uttered the most heartfelt prayer she had ever said in her life. “Thank you, God.”
Laughing, Elise said, “You might not be thinking that an hour from now.”

“You don’t know me very well if you believe that.” She lowered her head to kiss the soft skin of Elise’s upper thigh. “Can I go again?” she murmured, nibbling her way closer.

“Mm hm.” Elise already sounded far away. “It doesn’t take long.”

Thank you, Alison repeated in her mind. Whatever I did to deserve this, I promise to keep doing it.

This time Elise wasn’t nearly so sensitized, and Alison had the freedom to explore in a more leisurely fashion—or so she thought. As it turned out, the period of calm lasted only a minute or two before Elise’s hips were moving again. Alison was startled by how rapidly the arousal ramped up, and in less than five minutes she was holding on as Elise bucked and cried out a second time. This one seemed a little less strong, and soon Elise slumped back on the bed, her forearm over her eyes.

“Fuck,” she swore quietly. “That was fast.”

“Was it?” Alison had no idea what was normal for her.

Elise nodded. “It hit like a brick wall.”

Alison kissed her upper thighs and then the swollen skin under her hands, smiling as Elise jerked. “I don’t mind,” she said, placing another soft kiss. “By my count I have at least two more coming, and I’m planning to make the most of them.” Tenderly she ran a finger along satin smooth skin, fascinated by the beauty of this most intimate place that somehow, through a grace she’d never earned, she was being allowed to see and touch. For several minutes she soothed Elise with the gentleness of her attentions, waiting for the telltale sign. When Elise’s hips began to move again, she slid two fingers down and then slowly, reverently pushed them inside.

“Oh, yes,” Elise sighed. “Yes…”

Alison closed her eyes, unable to move for a moment. This was heaven on earth. This incredible sensation of being inside Elise, of being not only allowed but welcomed, was almost more than she could bear. “You feel so good,” she whispered.

She pushed up on all fours then, a task made somewhat more difficult by the loss of one hand, but she wasn’t about to move it. Instead she straddled Elise’s leg, propping herself up with her other arm, and finally gave herself the prize she’d forsaken earlier. Elise gasped as she felt the
tug on her nipple, then arched her back when Alison forcefully thrust her fingers in while biting down.

Settling onto her elbow, Alison used the leverage to slide a hand beneath Elise’s back and hold her up, wanting to pull her close as she suckled at her breast. Elise responded ardently to the possessive gesture, arching even further and pushing her breast into Alison’s mouth. It was the most erotic thing Alison had ever seen, and she thought that if she lived two hundred years she would never forget the sight. She settled into a rhythm, pumping her fingers while sucking, tugging and biting, with Elise vocally encouraging her every step of the way. At last her arm grew tired and she paused, leaving her fingers inside while running her thumb through the abundant moisture. When she judged it sufficiently lubricated she began pumping again, this time using her thumb to stimulate the clitoris with each motion. She timed her thrusts with tugs and bites at Elise’s nipple, listening avidly to the cries of pleasure. She never let up, never paused, never varied the timing, and this time the sign of impending orgasm was a sudden silence on Elise’s part. Without letting go of the nipple in her mouth, Alison looked up to see what was happening. Elise’s head was back, her neck straining and her mouth open, and soon a groan ripped from her throat, starting low and climbing as her body began to shake. Alison bit down and pulled, stretching the nipple and holding it in place as she continued her thrusts. Elise’s body trembled more violently, her back arched further, and then she convulsed, letting out a cry so loud that it was nearly a scream.

Alison released her immediately, raising her head to watch as she continued her thrusts. Elise bucked and cried out for half a minute before finally gasping, “Stop! Stop!” as she seized Alison’s hand in her own, fighting for breath.

Alison watched, mesmerized by her beauty. Her lips were swollen and red, her face flushed, and when she finally opened her eyes, they seemed even lighter by comparison.

“Alison,” she groaned. “Oh, my God, that was amazing.”

For her part, Alison was swamped by a depth of emotion that she didn’t dare speak aloud. With her fingers still buried inside Elise, she could feel her heartbeat, and the intimacy almost made her tear up. She never wanted to move. She never wanted Elise to leave again. She wanted her to park her hovercraft inside the garage and stay, tonight and forever.
But that was impractical and improbable, and Alison didn’t live her life that way. People simply didn’t fall in love and move in like that. It didn’t happen. It especially didn’t happen to people like her and Elise, who had so many obligations and such crowded professional lives.

But here, in this moment, with her fingers still surrounded by softness, warmth and a throbbing pulse, she could lose herself in the joy of knowing that she was the one who had brought Elise to this point. She was the reason Elise was still panting, still holding her hand, and staring at her as if she were an apparition.

“I thought you said yours weren’t as big as mine,” she said with a smile.

“They usually aren’t.” Elise swallowed hard. “That was...that was huge. Fuck. I may never move again.”

_That would be fine by me._ Alison leaned down and kissed her gently. “You don’t have to move until you want to. But I have to tell you, I’m going to be disappointed if I don’t get at least one more.”

Elise laughed weakly. “I don’t know if I can after that one.”

“You can.”

“And you’re suddenly an expert because...?”

“Because I can still feel your heart beating.” Alison shifted her fingers, causing Elise to jerk violently. “And because you’re still ramped up.” She pulled her arm out from under Elise’s back, swung her leg over and crouched back down in her little place in paradise. “And because I won’t stop until you do,” she murmured, kissing Elise’s thigh.

“You’re going to kill me.” But Elise let go of her hand, an implicit permission to continue, and Alison took instant advantage.

“Maybe. But you’ll go out very, very happy.” Gently she laid a path of kisses up her thigh, then touched her tongue to what had just become her favorite place in the world. This time Elise didn’t jump quite so high, and Alison continued to kiss and nuzzle her softly, keeping her grounded without stimulating her too much. Eventually she tried a soft lick, and when Elise simply sighed she knew she was ready.

She went slow this time, thoroughly enjoying the opportunity to explore since Elise wasn’t nearly so sensitive. And all the time she kept her fingers still, leaving them there as a presence but not bringing them to Elise’s attention. Only when Elise’s pelvis began rocking did she set up a leisurely thrusting motion, going deeply in and pulling nearly all the way
out, then slowly pushing back to the hilt. Her tongue matched the rhythm of her fingers, and she kept this pace all the way through, even as the tell-tale shaking began. Elise’s hips strained upward, trying to get more contact, but Alison refused the unspoken plea and maintained her speed, listening avidly to the gasps and moans. Then Elise convulsed twice, briefly, crying out before straining upward once again. Alison paused.

“No! Don’t stop, don’t stop,” Elise said urgently.

“Was that...?”

Elise nodded, her eyes shut and her neck arched. “Keep going!”

Alison didn’t need to be asked again. This time she increased her speed and varied the pressure, and was shocked when the trembling began after only a minute or so. Another minute or two after that and Elise bucked again, this orgasm lasting slightly longer than the last but nowhere near as long as the one before. Once again her hips were moving immediately afterward, and with a sense of awe Alison kept going. What was that, five already?

It was time for something a little different. She pulled her fingers all the way out, causing an instant protest.

“Shh,” she said. “Don’t worry. They won’t be gone for long.” Almost before she finished the sentence she was sliding three fingers back in, watching as Elise’s mouth opened silently. “Is it all right?” she asked, worried that her expression might be one of pain rather than pleasure. It was certainly a tight fit.

Elise nodded as her hands strayed to her own breasts and began tugging at the nipples, leaving Alison slack-jawed as she watched.

“Elise,” she whispered, mesmerized.

Gray eyes opened and stared into hers with no self-consciousness. Elise knew exactly what she was doing, and Alison was riveted by the sight. In a night of erotic images, this one instantly took top place, searing itself into her memory. She resumed her thrusts, still staring as Elise pulled and twisted her nipples, and suddenly she was as aroused as if she’d never had her own orgasm. She ached with need, wanting desperately to touch herself, but masturbation in front of someone else was one thing she had never done. It crossed the line of her sense of privacy. And yet, here was Elise looking at her with no embarrassment whatsoever as she pleasured herself. Why shouldn’t she do the same?

She looked down just long enough to lubricate her thumb and position
it for the final drive. Then she sat up on her heels, met Elise’s gaze, and deliberately slid her other hand down her body. Oh yes, she was ready.

Elise’s eyes widened as she watched, and her hands stilled on her breasts. Alison shook her head. “If you stop, I stop,” she said. “I want us to come together if we can.”

“If you do that, I might come in about six seconds,” Elise said in a molten voice. “God, you’re sexy.”

“So are you.” Alison began a slow thrusting, accompanied by a light motion with her thumb, and every one of them showed on Elise’s face. “Sexy and so damned beautiful,” she whispered, her other hand finding the place of her own need. Her eyes closed briefly as she was swamped with relief, but she forced herself to keep them open, not wanting to miss a moment of this incredible experience. Elise was still watching her, still pulling on her own nipples, and Alison felt a fresh rush of arousal. God in heaven, she might just come first at this rate.

She tried to keep a slower rhythm with Elise, but her need was too great and required faster manipulation, and she couldn’t manage two different speeds with her hands. Soon her fingers were pumping frantically into Elise, who was gasping with every bump of the thumb as she tried and ultimately failed to maintain their gaze. Her head dropped as her back began to arch, and still she tugged and twisted her nipples, sending Alison into the stratosphere. It took every bit of her remaining strength to maintain her rhythm with both of them, but she’d have died before giving up. With her eyes riveted to the sight of Elise’s hands, she drove them both to the edge, hoping and praying that they could come together. When she saw Elise beginning to tremble she redoubled her efforts, not wanting to be left behind, but of course that affected Elise as much as her. As she watched, Elise ceased her movements and simply pinched her nipples, her mouth opening silently as the pressure built. Alison felt it building in herself as well, but Elise was still ahead, straining, conspicuously silent—and then she convulsed, her torso coming off the bed as she cried out Alison’s name.

The shock of hearing her own name in the moment of orgasm sent Alison right to the critical point, and she let out a desperate moan, knowing that she was so close, so close…but she’d lost track of what Elise needed, and she couldn’t do them both justice anymore. Somehow her eyes had shut in spite of her determination, and she hadn’t even noticed
until she felt Elise’s hand on hers, giving her permission to focus solely on herself. Her eyes flew open, meeting Elise’s gaze, and her orgasm swarmed up and crashed over her. With a sob of release she sank down, her body crumpling in on itself, still working until every bit of pleasure had been wrung out of her. At last she slumped over and rested her forehead on Elise’s stomach, too weak to do anything else. Even breathing was an effort, and by the way her head was rising and falling, Elise was having some difficulty with that as well.

For long minutes she crouched there, not particularly comfortable but unable to summon the will to move. Then she felt fingers in her hair, stroking gently, and Elise said, “Alison, honey, I don’t want to rush you but… I really need you to pull out.”

Alison lifted her head. “I’m sorry…” God, she just wasn’t thinking. “It’s all right, you’re a little exhausted.”

With a small snort, Alison said, “Aren’t you? Okay, here we go.” Slowly she pulled out, to Elise’s vocal relief. “Ouch,” she whispered, flexing the cramped fingers.

“Are you okay?”

“Sure, as long as I don’t ever have to use this hand again.” She crawled over Elise’s leg and flopped onto her stomach with a gusty sigh. “Jesus, Mary and Joseph. I can’t move.”

“Tell me about it.” Elise closed her legs, groaning with the motion. “Walking might be a problem tomorrow.” She rolled over, tucking herself next to Alison and wrapping an arm around her back. “But it was worth it. You were spectacular.”

Alison smiled tiredly at the face only centimeters from hers. “I think you were the spectacular one. If I never have sex again I can still die happy.”

“I can’t!”

Chuckling, Alison said, “I only mean that right now. By tomorrow morning I’ll probably think I can’t possibly live another hour if I don’t make love to you again.” She closed her eyes, too exhausted to keep them open anymore.

“Unfortunately, you have to work.”

Alison groaned. “Don’t remind me.” Why wasn’t it Friday, dammit?

She felt a light kiss on her cheek. “Thank you for saying that, by the way,” said Elise quietly.
“What, that I’m not thinking about work?”
“No. That you’ll want to make love to me again tomorrow.”
“Assuming I can recover in time.” In her sleepy state, it took a moment to realize that Elise wasn’t responding to her joke. She opened her eyes to find a gray gaze looking right at her.
“This wasn’t just sex to me,” Elise said.
The shiver down her spine chased away her exhaustion. “It wasn’t for me, either.” She wanted to add so much to that statement, but the words were too crowded in her throat.
Elise nodded slowly, a tiny smile curving her mouth. “So we’re still on the same page?”
If you’re falling in love with me, too, then yes. But that was trapped in her throat as well, and all she could say was, “Yes, we are.”
“Good.” Apparently satisfied, Elise closed her eyes.
Alison watched her, wide awake now, and heard the moment when her breathing changed to the slow, deep rhythm of sleep. She was awed by Elise’s trust and strength. How could she open herself up that way now, of all times? How could she trust anyone else after having her world turned inside out?
Because you’re the one who held her together. She told you that.
Then what would happen when she recovered her balance?
Gently she stroked Elise’s hair away from her face, the soft strands slipping through her fingers. Elise never stirred.
“I don’t want you to go,” she whispered. “Please don’t go.”
She watched for a while longer, then closed her own eyes as exhaustion reclaimed her. Whatever happened next, right now she would enjoy the beauty of sleeping beside Elise Hamilton.
Kathryn arrived home from São Paulo to find Molly waiting faithfully at the door. Though she no longer jumped in a frenzy upon her owner’s arrival, her excitement was still far more than an arthritic old dog should be displaying. Kathryn knew Molly wasn’t in any pain—the medications took care of that—but the fact was, her bones and joints were ‘past their sell-by date,’ as Lynne had put it. So today, just as she did every day, Kathryn stepped through the door and immediately stooped down to hug Molly, scratch her with both hands, and generally give her enough love and attention to prevent her from bouncing too much. It worked. And if she herself had just been effectively trained to do what Molly wanted, that was okay too. It was mutually beneficial.

As she finished her love session, she became aware of the silence in the house. Normally Gretchen at least called out a hello, and if Lynne were home she always came to the door to get her own love session—usually with some snide comment about being second in line to a fuzzball, which would give Kathryn the perfect opening for her own commentary. Lynne’s love for Barney had assumed such proportions that Kathryn now dreaded anything happening to that kitten.

“Where is everyone, Molly?” she asked, hanging up her coat. “Is it just you and me? Oh wait—you and me and Barney. Bet you never thought you’d get pushed down the ladder by something that weighs less than
your ear, did you?” Molly sat back on her haunches, watching alertly as
she took off her boots. “So tell me, how did I beat Lynne home? Yes, I
know, you don’t have any idea either. It’s past sunset in Colorado; she’d
better not still be out on that mountain.” A frisson of worry went down
her spine, even though she knew it was highly unlikely that anything had
happened. Still, this was the first day Lynne had gone anywhere without a
security escort—though in practical terms, Seven was the equivalent of an
entire security team all by herself. For that matter, so was Lynne.

With Molly trailing after, she went into the kitchen to find a message
on the terminal from her mother, telling anyone who got it that she was
out with a friend and would be back before dinner and before Barney’s
feeding time, just in case Lynne was late. “Though I don’t think he’ll need
bottle feeding much longer,” she added. “That little thing ate half his body weight
in kibble today, I swear.”

“Did you hear that, Molly? Your food is in imminent danger.” Kathryn
went to the covered dish on the counter, lifted the lid and smiled when
she saw the cookies. “I do love being home. Nope, sorry, this is not dog
food. It’s…oh god, it’s oatmeal raisin. Mmm.”

She grabbed two more for good measure and ran upstairs to change
out of her uniform. The moment she opened the bedroom door, a small
gray and black form went zipping past her legs and down the hall. “Shit!
Barney, get back here!”

Of course it was just as useless to call back a kitten as it was to
convince a dog that cookies were not meant for her. Which meant that by
the time Kathryn came back to the room with Barney in her hands, Molly
had demolished the two cookies she’d dropped on the hall table in her
haste. “Molly! Dammit, those were mine!”

Molly’s ears drooped and she lowered her head, fully aware that she’d
transgressed. Kathryn sighed at the pathetic display. “If you ever teach
Lynne that look, I’m screwed. And you, Mister Kitten, need to keep your
ass in this room until Lynne gets home. I’m not chasing you all over the
house while you get yourself in trouble.” One of the things she and Lynne
had both learned was that a healthy, well-fed and mobile kitten was worse
than an infant child when it came to finding inappropriate things to eat,
bite, poke, climb or get lost in. Molly had never been this much trouble as
a puppy.

She carried Barney into the room, shut the door behind her and
dumped him on the bed. “There. That’ll keep you busy for about five
seconds.” The bed was still a monstrosely high object for Barney, who had
to find ways to climb down the comforter in order to get off. It gave her
enough time to change into jeans, a silk undershirt and a sweater, at
which point she turned around to find Barney hanging from the comforter
by one paw and batting at Molly’s muzzle with the other. Molly snorted,
shook her head, and sniffed the kitten again, earning another smack in the
snout. Kathryn couldn’t help but laugh. “Serves you right for stealing my
cookies,” she told her.

Lights outside alerted her to the arrival of another hovercraft, and she
went to the window to see the craft circle around to the barn and vanish
inside. Lynne and Seven were home, and the weight in her stomach that
she’d tried not to acknowledge magically melted away. She leaned against
the window, smiling as her wife and her friend came sauntering out of the
barn. Lynne was saying something that involved some gesturing, and…
what was she carrying? It looked like a rock. They spoke for a minute
longer, then split up as Seven went down the path to the guest house and
Lynne turned for the main house. Kathryn waited at the window, knowing
Lynne would look up, and waved when she did a few seconds later. Lynne
grinned and waved back, leaving Kathryn with a sense of warmth out of
all proportion to their simple exchange.

She turned back to the room, where Barney had completed his descent
and was now climbing over a patient Molly, who was lying on the floor
and looking rather pleased with herself. “God, you are an attention slut,”
Kathryn said, shaking her head. “You’ll even take it from a kitten. You
realize that now I’ll have to tell Lynne she was right about you. Come on,
fuzzball.” She scooped Barney up and opened the door. “Let’s go say hi to
your mom.”

With Molly trotting after her, she headed down the stairs and into the
entry hall, where Lynne had already hung her jacket on a peg and was now
shucking her boots. “Hi, stranger,” she began, then got her first real look
at both Lynne and the jacket. “What the hell happened to you?”

Lynne gave her a heart-melting full grin. “I went for a little hike with
Seven. Hi, Barney! Let me have him.” She took Barney from Kathryn’s
hands and gave her a big kiss in exchange. “How are you doing, buddy?”
she asked the kitten, and Kathryn rolled her eyes.

“I’m doing fine,” she answered pointedly. “Thanks for asking.”
Lynne looked up from petting Barney and kissed her again. “I just talked to you this afternoon, so I know you’re fine. But I haven’t seen Barney since this morning.”

Kathryn resigned herself to being second fiddle. “So did you fall down a well during this hike? I thought you were skiing.”

“We were. Kathryn, it was fantastic. I had such a great time! Seven’s getting really good, I hardly even have to tell her anything anymore. All she needs is a little practice. And I finally got to complete that run, and oh my god it’s a blast. You and I have to go back up there. I think I ran it twenty-five times. I know every bump and jump on that thing now.”

“That must have been fun for Seven.”

Lynne snuggled Barney to her chest. “Seven is a good, good friend. And yes, very patient. But she said she enjoyed seeing me so happy.”

Kathryn knew exactly how Seven felt. It was a joy to see Lynne radiating happiness like this. It had been far too long. “Well, I’m really glad you got to go. But where did you go hiking?”

“Idaho Springs.” Lynne’s smile was blinding. “I found it, Kathryn! I found my parents’ house! It was unbelievable. I didn’t think I would after all this time, but Seven saw the rocks from the fireplace. If she hadn’t been there I’d have missed them; she was scanning in infrared. They were mostly buried and under shrubbery. I dug around the edges—that’s why I’m so filthy—and found the corner and god, it was just heartbreaking. Look, I brought one home.” She leaned over, put Barney on the floor and picked up a rounded rock. “This is from my house. The house I grew up in! Can you believe it?”

Kathryn looked from the rock to her wife’s animated face and tried very hard to keep her smile in place. “No, I can’t. But I’m glad you found it.”

Lynne’s face fell. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just…long day, I guess. I’m really happy for you, Lynne.”

Lynne put the rock down and reached out for her hands. “What happened after you called me?”

“I finished my interviews and came home.” Kathryn shrugged. “Nothing much.”

“I know that’s not true. Something’s wrong. Tell me.” She was so instantly concerned that Kathryn was even more determined not to say anything and ruin her moment of joy.
“I’m fine, really. Just hungry and a little tired and glad to be home. And where is Barney?”

The redirection worked. Lynne let her go and went off in search of their truant kitten, while Kathryn beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen in search of replacement cookies. She didn’t know how to handle the emotions that had swamped her. Here, in the warmth of her mother’s kitchen, with her wife safe and happy in the house, she felt more alone than she had in years.

Needing something to keep herself busy, she pulled the coffee beans from their drawer and began the process of grinding the beans and filling the coffeemaker. As the water dripped through, she went so far as to clean the grinder, which apparently hadn’t been taken apart since before Voyager was lost. And while she had it in pieces on the counter, she heard the shower start overhead and felt utterly abandoned. Lynne had seen that she was upset, and yet she was so full of her own happiness that she’d let it go.

Molly came padding into the kitchen, sat on her feet and leaned against her. The gesture of unconditional love hit her in a particularly tender spot, and she was horrified at the tears that came to her eyes. Crouching down, she hugged her dog fiercely. “You always know when I need a hug, don’t you?” she asked. “Don’t worry, Molly, I’ll never throw you over for a kitten.”

After several minutes of holding her dog and feeling sorry for herself, she decided she’d had enough and stood up to finish cleaning the grinder. She heard the shower go off and wondered what Lynne would do next—bottle feed Barney, probably. It was about that time, which also meant that Gretchen should be getting home soon. She hoped so. With the mood she was in, the more people who were in this house, the better. Maybe she should give Seven and Revi a call and invite them over for dinner…but then, that would be assuming that Gretchen was planning to make enough for five.

Footsteps on the stairs alerted her to Lynne’s arrival, and she busied herself with reassembling the grinder. She wasn’t quite ready to face her wife yet.

But Lynne walked straight into the kitchen and leaned against the counter next to her, ducking her head and trying to meet Kathryn’s eyes.
“Hi,” she said softly. “I’m clean now. I can give you a better hug if you’d like one.”

Kathryn hesitated, then dropped the part she was holding and turned into the offered embrace. “Thank you,” she whispered, tucking her nose into the warmth of Lynne’s throat. “I did need one.”

Lynne held her gently, rubbing her back with one hand, then dropped a kiss on her temple. “Please tell me what’s going on. Did someone say something nasty today? Or is this about yesterday?”

Her obvious concern was even worse than Molly’s quiet affection, and Kathryn felt her throat closing. Not trusting her voice, she simply shook her head.

Lynne’s arms tightened around her. “You’re starting to scare me. Something has really gotten you.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Kathryn managed.

“Yes it is. You’ve got coffee in the coffeemaker and no cup in sight. That’s not like you.”

Kathryn let out a choked laugh. Lynne really did know her well. The laugh and the comfort seemed to ease the constriction in her throat, and she pulled back from their embrace. “I don’t want to sound like a clingy wife,” she began.

Lynne studied her, still holding her waist. “Okay, so this is about us. Tell me.”

She didn’t want to say it, but knew she had to. “It hurts that you took Seven today and not me.”

“But I couldn’t take you today,” said Lynne in confusion. “You were in São Paulo.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. You took Seven with you to find your parent’s house. Do you know what I would have given to be there for that?” The tears rose again, and this time she couldn’t hold them back. “I have been with you through so much hell, for so long—why couldn’t you let me be with you for a little piece of heaven? Why couldn’t you wait just a few days?”

Lynne looked stricken. “Oh, god. Kathryn, I…I’m sorry. I just haven’t been able to even think about looking for that house until now, and then today I was feeling so free again, and...oh, Christ, I’m so sorry, love.” She pulled Kathryn into another embrace, holding her tightly, and from the
safety of this place Kathryn let herself say the things she needed to get out.

“I hate having to be away from you. I hate the debriefings, fucking hours of explaining myself and repeating myself and explaining again, and it’s all there in my logs if they’d just take the goddamned time to watch them. And I hate the speeches and the tours because they take me away from you, and every damned day I’m waiting for someone else to pop up with a sign that says what about the ones you left behind, because I did leave them behind, and now I’m leaving you behind, and Revi too, god, she needs so much support right now and I’m not even here.” Her voice was shaking and the tears were trickling out, but she no longer cared. “And yesterday I went nine rounds with Necheyev about Gohat and Revi and what we got out of that mission, and she has the right to be angry, but I am so tired of having to justify everything I say and do! It’s like walking on goddamned eggshells; I’m on probation and everything I do gets examined with a fucking microscope, and at this point I’m not sure a pair of admiral’s bars are worth it. I’m not even sure I want to stay in Starfleet. I don’t have a life of my own and in the meantime you’re going to fucking Colorado and finding your parents’ house, and I wasn’t there!”

Lynne said nothing, simply holding her as tightly as she could and rocking her from side to side, letting her cry out her frustration and anger and most of all, her deep grief at being denied the opportunity to see the first truly joyous thing that had happened to Lynne since they’d gotten home. And when she’d purged her system and the tears had stopped, she sagged against Lynne’s body, heavy with a kind of tiredness she hadn’t felt in a while.

“Do you want to know the most amazing thing of all?” asked Lynne in a very quiet voice.

“What’s that?”

“Seven knew. That’s how much progress she’s made in recovering her humanity. She’s gone right past me. She knew you should have been there, and she asked if waiting four more days would have made that much difference. At the time I really thought it would have. Now I know I just made a huge mistake, and of all things, I should have listened to Seven on a matter of psychology.” She pulled back, smiling sadly at Kathryn and gently wiping away the last tears. “I’m sorry you feel like you’re leaving us behind.
Because you’re not. Look at Seven and Revi; look at where they are now. Seven’s giving me goddamned lessons in human nature, and Revi’s so strong these days that she met her mother on her own turf and had the first real conversation they’ve ever had in their lives. Our friends are better off than they have ever been, because of you—because you refused to leave them behind. Mrs. Martin is better off today, because you gave her son back to her. She told you that. She blessed you. You and I are free today because you put together a bulletproof plan to catch an assassin, and it worked perfectly, except for me. And all of our Maquis shipmates came home today, because you fought so hard for it and you made me understand how important it was, and I’d have moved heaven and earth to make that happen as long as it was in my power. I’m so glad it was, because that was a gift I could give you. Yes, I did it for B’Elanna too, and Chakotay and the others, but the best part was knowing that I could take that burden off you. Because I know you’d never, ever have let go until it was taken care of. Kathryn, you ask so much of yourself, and you don’t seem to see what you actually accomplish. The reason they’re watching you so closely at Starfleet is because they’re thinking about making you an admiral. I mean, how amazing is that? You are a spectacular, incredible woman, and I am a total idiot for not understanding what today would have meant to you. And I am so sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry.” Now Kathryn felt just as guilty as she’d known she would. “That’s why I didn’t want to say anything. You were so happy when you came home, and now look.”

“Oh, love.” Lynne leaned in and met her with a soft, tender kiss that did wonders for Kathryn’s aching heart. When they pulled apart again, she said, “You had to tell me. Do you think I’d have stayed happy knowing that something was eating you up inside? At least now we can do something about it.”

“We can’t do anything about it. It’s done.”

Lynne shook her head. “No, it’s not. Are you up for a trip back to Colorado now? Because I want to show you something.”

“What? Sweetheart…I appreciate the thought, but it’s night. We’re not going to see anything.”

“We’ll see this. Besides, the moon is almost full.”

“I know what you’re trying to do. But it won’t be the same.”

“We’re not going to the house.”

That got her attention. “Where do you want to go?”
“Will you let me surprise you?” When Kathryn hesitated, she added, “Please. I’ve been wanting to show you this for a very long time. And I think tonight is the perfect night.”

Though she didn’t see how it could make up for the loss, she knew she had to let Lynne try. “Okay. We’ll go after dinner.”

“Thank you.” Lynne kissed her again, and Kathryn needed this touch too much to let her go any time soon. Which was why they were still kissing when Gretchen came into the kitchen.

“Good lord,” she said. “I can’t leave you two alone for a minute.”

Lynne turned, keeping an arm around Kathryn’s waist as she said, “Oh, it’s been much longer than a minute, Gretchen.”

Dinner was a quiet affair between the three of them. Phoebe was out of town, and it turned out that Revi had decided she wanted to take Seven out to eat ‘someplace fancy,’ as she’d told Kathryn upon receiving the invitation to dine with them. When Kathryn pointed out that they’d all gone someplace fancy just the night before, Revi smiled and said she’d been thinking more along the lines of a romantic meal, and any meal with Tom, B’Elanna and the Doctor attending could not be classified as romantic.

Which of course meant the dinner conversation in the Janeway house focused largely on Revi and Seven, and whether Revi was coming out of her post-interlink slump—all of which was fine with Kathryn, who wanted to stay away from the topic of Lynne’s visit to her parents’ house. If that was brought up she knew she wouldn’t be able to keep her feelings off her face, and she just didn’t have the will to explain anything to her mother right now. Fortunately, Lynne understood.

After Barney was fed—with Lynne excitedly noting that he only drank half a bottle this time—they suited up in winter clothes and hiking boots, and Lynne put together a small bag of goodies that she refused to let Kathryn see. Gretchen didn’t seem fazed when they told her they were going for a short hike in Colorado, but she did make sure they took a stasis bag of oatmeal raisin cookies with them.

At the Denver transport station, Lynne rented a hovercraft from a Bajoran woman who winked at her and said, “Back so soon?”

“I can’t stay away from this place,” Lynne answered with a smile.

Kathryn reached for her hand as they walked to the underground parking. “You do realize she was flirting with you.”

“Mm hm. And I also realize that I’m very taken.”
“You know, I kind of like it when women flirt with you,” Kathryn decided. “Because it makes it all the more sweet that I’m the one who got you.”

“I think that might be the other way around,” said Lynne.

They flew northwest out of Denver for nearly an hour, transferring from one transit beacon to another and then a third before Lynne descended, settling the hovercraft down with hardly a bump.

“You’re getting pretty good at this,” Kathryn said as they opened their doors and climbed out.

“It’s not that different from driving. Except for that third axis thing.”

“Ah, the pitch part of roll, pitch and yaw.”

“Yeah. But not having to rely on speed for lift helps a lot. Okay, here’s your headlamp. We’re going to be heading pretty steeply downward, so keep your eyes on your feet. I haven’t been here in a few hundred years and I have no idea what the trail’s like. Or if there is a trail.”

Kathryn put on her headlamp and snapped on the red light. “Did you come here today?”

“Nope.” Lynne activated her own light and shouldered the bag.

“Then how on Earth did you find it?” Kathryn looked around at the mountains surrounding the small plateau they’d landed on. The moon was well out in the open, casting a silver white glow on the snowy peaks and shining so brightly that she could see her own shadow. There were no clouds visible, and even with the moon crowding things out, the sky was still full of stars. More even than at her mother’s farm, though oddly enough there was less snow here.

“Because I know every one of those peaks. I can’t even tell you how many times I hiked out here—this was my favorite place in the world. And mountains don’t change, thank god.” She led the way off the plateau, not even hesitating at the edge. “The trail’s gone. I guess people don’t come this way anymore. Actually I think I was one of the few who did. It was kilometers from nowhere back then.”

Kathryn stayed close behind, marveling that she could find her way without a tricorder or even a trail. “It’s still kilometers from nowhere.”

“Yes, but having a hovercraft changes everything.”

“Are you sure the trail’s gone? It could be ten meters over that way and we wouldn’t see it.”

“Look out for the drop here.” Lynne stepped off a rock and kept
“Because the trail was perfectly lined up in the notch between Black Mountain and Hartford Mountain, with Lightning Peak directly behind me. You don’t need a map or a tricorder when you know your mountains. As long as you can see them, you always know where you are.”

“But we’re in forest now,” Kathryn pointed out. “You can’t see your mountains.”

“No, but all we have to do is go down.”

“How far?”

“Until we get to the bottom.”

“Okay, I was hoping for something a little more specific.”

Lynne chuckled. “About a kilometer and a half. Twenty, twenty-five minutes.”

Sure enough, in twenty minutes the ground leveled out. Lynne continued in a more or less straight line, picking her way around boulders and the occasional fallen tree, and before long Kathryn could see the forest ahead growing lighter. Either they were coming into a clearing, or this was another plateau.

It turned out to be neither. She stepped past the last tree to see a lake stretching before her, its waters perfectly reflecting the moon and the glowing peaks surrounding it. They were in a beautiful tree-lined bowl, empty of any signs of human habitation save one small cabin on the far shore.

“Wow,” she said, turning in a circle. “This is gorgeous.”

Lynne was standing stock still, staring at the cabin across the lake. “Incredible,” she whispered. “It’s not the same one, but it’s in exactly the same place. They must have built over the old foundation.” She reached up and snapped off her light, which had become unnecessary in the moonlit basin.

Kathryn turned off her own headlamp. “Did you know the owners then?”

“No, it was a rental. When I was a girl my parents and I used to come here for weekend camping trips. Well, they called it camping. They figured if it didn’t involve their own bed and a full kitchen, it was camping.”

Kathryn smiled. “I think I’d have liked your parents.”

“You’d have loved them. And they’d have been so happy with you. They despaired of me ever finding the right one.” Lynne scanned the shore.
to their right and then pointed. “That’s where I wanted to be. I was off by a little bit.”

An immense boulder stood at the lake’s edge, easily the size of a house, and with a quick tug on Kathryn’s hand Lynne headed straight for it. By the time they arrived at its base, Kathryn realized that her perception had been thrown off by the lack of comparators. It was the size of a two-story house.

Lynne put a hand on the stone and looked up, her smile joyous. “Oh, I’ve missed you, my friend. You haven’t changed a bit.” She turned. “Kathryn, meet my favorite rock in the whole world. Rock, meet my beautiful wife. I’m hoping she and I will see a lot more of you.”

Kathryn laughed. Putting her own hand on the cold stone, she said, “Nice to meet you, Rock.”

Lynne covered her hand and said, “Now let me tell you why this is my favorite rock in the whole world. When I was nine years old, my parents brought me here for the first time. I was already quite a scrambler by then, and my dad bet me a whole chocolate bar that I couldn’t climb this. You have to realize, a chocolate bar out here was a big deal. The nearest store was a two-hour hike and a ninety-minute drive away.”

“Your dad lost that chocolate bar,” Kathryn said with total assurance. “Oh yeah. He did. I scared the shit out of myself climbing this. Do you realize how big this looked to a nine-year-old kid? But I did it, and then I was on top of the whole fucking world. That’s the day my life changed. I felt a kind of happiness on top of this rock that I’d never felt before, and I’ve spent the rest of my life looking for that feeling on every mountain I’ve climbed. This is where it all started.”

Kathryn craned her neck, looking at the top of the rock and trying to imagine a nine-year-old Lynne pulling herself up its steep sides. “I’m impressed. I’m also impressed with your dad. It couldn’t have been easy standing down here and watching you. What if you fell? Was the nearest hospital in the same town as the store?”

“Oh, no, much further. And frankly I don’t think I could have done what Dad did, if I’d had a kid my age. But Dad knew I could do it. He believed in me, so I believed in myself.” Lynne took their hands off the rock and pulled Kathryn around its base. “Here’s the starting point. Ready to go up?”
“Now?” Kathryn looked at her in disbelief. “Have you noticed that it’s quite dark?”

“What’s that thing on your head?”

“Very funny. It’s still dangerous, Lynne. Artificial light doesn’t give the same depth perception as full-wavelength sunlight.”

“I’ll go first and talk you up it. You can do it.”

Kathryn looked back at the rock doubtfully, then realized what Lynne had said. “You believe in me.”

“Always.”

With her heart melting a little inside her chest, she drew Lynne’s head down for a sweet kiss. “Thank you for that.”

“Oh, you don’t have to thank me. But I’ll take all of those kisses I can get.” Lynne smiled at her. “I’ve believed in you since the moment I met you. Ever since you talked me down from my terror that you were some military spook, and convinced me to put on that biotransmitter so that I could walk out of sickbay and see for myself where I was. You were my lifeline then. You’re my lifeline now, but for much better reasons. And you’re the first person I have ever brought here.”

“I am?” She was beginning to understand now.

“Finding my parents’ house wasn’t the thing I’ve been looking forward to. In fact, I’ve been dreading the idea of looking for it because I was so sure I’d never find it. I figured it would be long gone, and I’d maybe, maybe be able to estimate where it had once stood. When Seven found those rocks, I was shocked.” She rested her hand on the boulder again. “I am so sorry that I hurt you by not taking you there. But that isn’t the place I’ve been dreaming about. This is. This rock was my touchstone. It’s where I came when I needed to think, or when I just wanted to be alone in my special place. This always felt like home to me, out of all the places I’ve been. When you and I got together, I swore that one of the first things I’d do when we got back to Earth was bring you here. And here we are.”

Kathryn looked up at her, marveling at the picture she made. Lynne looked like a goddess, standing there with her hand on the rock and the moonlight throwing the planes of her face into sharp relief. A goddess of the mountains, come down to her earthly home in a remote valley...and now sharing that home with her.

*She’s never brought anyone else here.*

The knowledge seeped into her heart, filling and healing the places
that had been so hurt by what she’d thought was a careless disregard. This truly must have been a special place for Lynne, if she had kept it to herself her whole life.

“When were you planning to bring me here?” she asked.

Lynne smiled. “This weekend. The schedule got moved up a little bit.”

Kathryn stepped into her, wrapping her arms around her back and tucking herself into her favorite position. “Thank you, sweetheart. This is perfect, and I’m so glad you brought me here now. God, I’m sorry I fell apart on you.”

Lynne squeezed her tightly. “Don’t apologize. That was just a pressure relief valve blowing. Probably the same valve I blew yesterday—or at least part of it.”

It probably was, Kathryn realized.

“You needed it just as much as I did,” Lynne continued. “I’m just glad you let me hold you while you did it. And I’m sorry our homecoming has been so hard for you. You’re the only one of us who never got a real break, but you just need to hang on for three more days and then I will take care of you like you’ve never been taken care of before. You’re going to get tired of me coddling you.”

“I want to coddle you, too.”

“Okay. It’s a deal.” Lynne dropped a kiss on her head and added, “I need you to understand one more thing about my parents’ house. There’s nothing left of it except those rocks, and once you and I pull them all out, I have no reason to go back there. The magic there was the house, not the place itself, and the house is gone. The magic here is the place.”

Kathryn pulled back enough to look into her eyes. “I think I get it now. So you want to collect all of the rocks from your old fireplace? What will you do with them?”

“Build a new fireplace. In our new home, wherever we decide to put it.” She kissed Kathryn once more and let her go. “Come on. The view’s spectacular from up there.”

They switched their headlamps to full spectrum light, ruining their night vision but making it much safer for the climb. And Lynne was right, it wasn’t as difficult as it looked. The handholds were readily available, and only once did Kathryn need Lynne’s support. “Not fair,” she complained. “Your legs are longer.”

“Hey, I did this with nine-year-old legs.”
“And the sympathy around here is really lacking,” Kathryn grumbled, smiling as she heard the laugh from above. Then Lynne pulled herself over the edge and turned, holding a hand down.

“Almost there. Just put your foot there...right, and now grab over here...” She caught Kathryn’s hand and pulled her the rest of the way, and Kathryn found herself atop a surprisingly smooth surface. She turned to look at the lake, catching her breath at the beauty of the scene. The moon was higher now, and its reflection in the lake was so brilliant that it was a secondary source of light in the valley. The water fairly shimmered.

“Don’t forget to turn off your headlamp,” Lynne said.

“Right.” She pulled it off her head, setting it carefully on the rock next to Lynne’s. “What are those?”

Lynne unfolded a second square of what looked like a metallic fabric and set it next to the first. “Some really cool things I found in Voyager’s database. I’m telling you, the equipment that mountain climbers have these days is amazing. These are butt warmers.”

Kathryn chuckled. “Well, I can see the advantage.”

“And cushioned, too.” She activated the two squares, which instantly puffed up. “Here, have a seat.”

Tentatively, Kathryn lowered herself onto the cushion, then let out a happy sound when the heat seeped through her pants. “Oh my.”

Lynne sat next to her. “Ooo. Yep, they live up to their advertising. Shit, I should have taken one of these skiing with us. Poor Seven was sitting on a tarp today while I was skiing my brains out on that run.”

“She really is a good friend.”

“Yes, she is.” Lynne reached into her pack and pulled out two stasis containers. “I had originally planned to bring champagne, but it’s a little nippy for that. So here’s your coffee.”

“You thought of everything. Hot chocolate, I take it?” she said, gesturing at the other container.

“You know it.” Lynne popped the seal and sniffed happily. “So—to special places and special people.”

They touched their cups together, and Kathryn hummed as the hot coffee slid down her throat. “Good choice, sweetheart.”

“Thank you.” Lynne put an arm around her waist, pulling her in close, and they sat in a contented silence broken only by the sounds of sipping.
The view really was glorious, and Lynne had been right—it was much better from up here.

“How often did you come here?” she asked.

“It varied. Every summer when I was a kid; we always camped here. And then when I grew up…sometimes I came several times a year, sometimes I didn’t make it back for a year or two if I was really busy with traveling. I always came when shit happened, though. This place always helped me figure things out.”

“Like what?”

“Well…I came here when Casey died.”

Kathryn winced, sorry to have brought up that topic. Casey had been Lynne’s first great love, her straight best friend to whom she’d never confessed her attraction. When Casey had died in a winter car accident, it had sent Lynne into a two-month attempt to drown her grief in alcohol.

“Did it help?” she asked gently.

“Actually, this is where I put an end to the drinking. Oh my god, I forgot about that! It’s still there!” The sudden excitement in Lynne’s voice was a surprise, given the subject.

“What is?”

“The bottle! Holy shit, I can’t believe it.” Lynne laughed. “I came here with a full bottle of vodka, the last one I ever drank. I was sitting up here, drinking straight from it, thinking all the usual things about what I’d thrown away by never having the courage to tell Casey how I felt. And while I was looking over the lake I got angry, really angry, for the first time. At myself, for being such a loser. For not honoring Casey’s life. She’d have been furious with me for just stepping off the planet the way I did. That wasn’t her style, and it wasn’t mine, either. I looked at that half-empty vodka bottle and suddenly all I wanted to do was get rid of it. So I stood up and threw it into the lake. It’s the only time I have ever littered in my entire life. I had a reputation as a total hard-ass on my climbing teams for insisting that nobody could ever leave anything behind. Not even a candy wrapper. But I was drunk and angry and I needed to do something symbolic, so I threw that bottle as hard as I could. And glass doesn’t decompose.”

“Not in four hundred years, it doesn’t.” Kathryn looked out at the lake, imagining a younger, angry Lynne throwing the bottle. She could easily see it.
“Can you believe it? Do you know how guilty I felt about that afterwards? And now it feels like a message from my past. Fucking hell, Kathryn, that bottle is still in the lake.” She laughed again. “It’s like the rocks from my parents’ fireplace!”

“Does that mean you want to dig that up, too? I’m a good diver.”

“Do you know, that’s tempting. Let me think about that for a while.”

Kathryn leaned against her, delighting in Lynne’s discovery. Suddenly she had a greater affinity for this lake, which held a link between Lynne’s past and her present.

“It’s a beautiful place,” she said. “Whoever owns that cabin is a lucky person.”

“Yes, she is.”

“She? You know the owner?” When Lynne turned a breathtaking smile on her, she connected the dots. “You’re the owner?”

“I own the whole valley, Kathryn. It’s ours.”

“When did that happen?”

“Well, it’s still in the final stages. But I asked Saator to look into it the day my Federation identity came through and I had access to my trust. Turns out the owner is a cranky old man who refused to sell because he didn’t trust any buyer not to develop the valley. I promised I wouldn’t, but that wasn’t good enough, so I had Saator draw up a legal contract to the effect that I would build no more than two dwellings, and one of them had to be on the foundation of the original. Even after I did that I wasn’t sure he’d sell. He was hemming and hawing about it. But then my interview came out on FedComm, and he realized who I was. He called and asked me why I wanted to buy, and when I told him what this valley meant to me, he said he’d sell. Actually he loved the idea of me owning it. So now we’re just waiting for the paperwork to be finalized, but for all practical purposes, we’re sitting on our land.”

“Fuck!” Kathryn swore. “And you’ve been keeping this to yourself all this time? When the hell were you going to tell me?—Oh, that’s right, this weekend.” She subsided as the full impact seeped into her brain. “I can’t believe you.”

“I wanted it to be a surprise. And I wanted it to be special.”

“Well, it certainly is that.” Kathryn gazed across the lake at the old cabin. “This is where you want to live, isn’t it?”

Lynne nodded. “But only if you think you could live here. It’s not the
easiest place for you. No matter what we do, it’s going to be a thirty-minute hovercraft ride to the nearest transport station, and you’ll have to go from there to Denver and then to San Francisco. So it would be a significant commute.”

“Not if I get my promotion.”

“What?”

“Flag officer prerogative—direct Starfleet transport. My dad used to transport right out of his study.”

“Now there’s a perk!”

Kathryn nodded. “Dad only saved a ten-minute hovercraft ride, but here it would be a real advantage.”

“Do you…I mean, can you imagine yourself here? It’s a lot different from Bloomington or San Francisco. Tell me the truth, love. Because even if you don’t think you could live here, I’ll always keep this place as my retreat. We can find someplace else. Something warmer, or closer to civilization.”

Kathryn looked back at the lake, hidden in its mountain bowl, and imagined their house of dreams in place of the tiny cabin. It wasn’t difficult. “What’s it like in the summer?” she asked.

“Cooler than Bloomington, that’s for sure. But still warm enough to swim in the lake, if you’ve got the ovaries for it. Warm enough to wear shorts and a tank top. Summers are short, but not as short as they are higher up. And winters are long, but they’re beautiful. Lots of days like this, when there’s snow on the ground but the sky is clear. And oh my god, the autumns are to die for. All the aspen trees turn gold.”

“It sounds wonderful.”

Lynne nodded, waiting.

“I think I could love living here,” Kathryn decided. “And we’ll keep my apartment in San Francisco for those times when we want to escape the snow.”

“Yes!” Lynne squeezed her nearly breathless. “Thank you!”

Laughing at her enthusiasm, Kathryn said, “It’s not a hard choice. Anything that puts that expression on your face is something I want to do. Besides, I knew the first day of our ski trip that we would live somewhere in these mountains.”

“You did? How could you know that when I didn’t know that?”

“Because you didn’t see yourself, sweetheart. I did. You turned into a
different woman practically the moment we stepped out of the transporter kiosk on that first high run. I’d only ever seen that woman once before.”

Lynne looked at her thoughtfully. “On Bliss, right?”

“Right.”

“Am I really that different?”

Running the backs of her fingers along Lynne’s cheek, she said softly, “You have no idea.”

Lynne caught her hand and kissed it. “You were a different woman on Bliss, too. But I’ve never seen her again, not even on the ski slope. I wonder if I could eventually find her here.”

“That woman was enjoying her first and only real vacation in seven years. She had absolutely nothing to worry about other than making you happy.” She gave Lynne a wink. “Well, that and keeping up her strength for your voracious sexual appetites.”

“Ha. As I recall, I was the one being constantly attacked.”

“Maybe you should have the Doctor check your memory engrams. They’re obviously damaged.” They smiled at each other before Kathryn added, “I think it takes me longer to relax than it does you. You get into your mountains and I swear it’s instantaneous. But it takes me days to wind down. Bliss was the only chance I’ve had in a long time to actually get to that point. I’m sure that once my leave starts, I’ll get there again. And afterward I’ll have a more normal worklife, so maybe it won’t take me so long anymore.”

“So you think you might be able to come home on a Friday and put work out of your mind, just temporarily?” Lynne gestured toward the cabin. “Sit out on the front porch with a glass of wine and watch the sun set behind the mountains? Listen to the breeze in the pines and the birds having their evening chorus, and become that woman from Bliss?”

Kathryn gazed out over the lake, listening to the absolute silence of the valley. There was only the faintest breeze sighing through the pines, and of course no birdsong. But she could imagine it. She could easily imagine sitting on a wide wooden porch, wine glass in hand, watching the waters of the lake reflect the changing colors of the sky...

And then she remembered her father, and all the evenings and weekends he spent in his study, working on issues that tightened the skin around his eyes and mouth. Never leaving Starfleet behind, even though he’d taken off the uniform for the night. Never having enough time for his
daughters…or his wife. All her life she had wanted to be like him. But since she’d returned home, she had been seeing him in a different light. She was beginning to understand that she had become like him, in many ways—and that she no longer wanted it. These last few weeks had pounded a new truth into her head, as the demands of Starfleet had carried her further and further away from what was truly important.

She looked back at Lynne, studying her features in the silver light of the moon. Dark eyes met hers calmly, waiting for her answer.

“I think I could,” she whispered. “But only if I know you’re somewhere in that house with me. Preferably right beside me on the porch.”

“Refilling your wine glass…” Lynne kept her own voice low.

“Taking the PADD out of my hand and telling me I can’t look at it until after breakfast…”

Lynne’s eyebrows rose. “Do you want me to do that?”

“I think I need to learn some new tricks,” Kathryn said. “I can’t live my life the way I have been. I deserve more, and so do you. And maybe having a whole valley all to ourselves is just what I need. Maybe I can find Bliss here.” She watched the smile light up Lynne’s face and added, “I think you’ll find it here. And that will make it easier for me.”

“God, I love you.” Lynne ducked down for a sweet kiss, then pulled back and held her gaze. “So that just leaves one more question to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“How important is it to you that we have the whole valley all to ourselves?”

“Well, who else—” She stopped. “Wait, you said you wrote up a contract for two dwellings.”

“Right. I, um…have a proposal to make to Seven and Revi. If you’re okay with that.”

Kathryn stared, then shook her head and laughed. “Of course I’m okay with that! I’ve been dreading the day they move out of the guest house.”

“You and me both. Honestly, I can’t even think about it. I get a sick feeling in my stomach, and that’s not an exaggeration.”

“Did they make a decision to stay on Earth, then?”

“Not that I know of. But I’ve made a decision that I want them in our lives just as close as I can get them, and if a world-class case of bribery will accomplish that, then I’m all for it.”
“That’ll be an interesting conversation.” Her smile was starting to hurt her face. “You’re going to have to get around Revi’s pride.”

“I think I can do that. I just need to present it as a favor to me. Or to you, if that doesn’t work.”

She laughed again, then touched Lynne’s nose with her fingertip. “You…are…devious.”

“I learned from the best.” Lynne grinned at her. “Besides, I asked Seven today if she thought she could live in the mountains, and she said yes. She loves the smell of the air.”

“Imagine Seven saying that a year ago,” Kathryn mused. “How far she’s come.”

“We’ve all come pretty far, I think.”

Kathryn looked out across the silver lake, now picturing two houses on the shore instead of one. Far enough apart for privacy, but close enough to stand on the porch of one and call out to the other. All the easy intimacy of their shipboard lives, here in a remote valley in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. She lifted her gaze, following the ridges of the mountains to their peaks, then upward to the dense carpet of stars blazing in the sky.

“Yes, we have,” she said. “All the way home.”
Seven trotted up the snowy steps of the guest house, eager for a shower and a quiet night with Revi. One of the disadvantages of being so far away from her was that their link had physical limitations. Though she had thoroughly enjoyed her day with Lynne, it had been a relief to materialize in the Bloomington transport station and instantly feel their connection reassert itself. Revi had been fine in her absence—in fact, she was in higher spirits than she’d been since visiting her parents. And Seven couldn’t wait to see her.

“Honey, I’m home!” she called out, just to make Revi laugh. The instant response from the living room brought a smile to her own face as she began pulling off her boots and ski jacket.

: Learned that from Lynne, I see. :
: Yes. It’s apparently a tradition of great antiquity. :
: You had a wonderful time. : It was a statement of fact; Revi was sensing Seven’s good mood.

: You seem to have had a good day as well. : Seven hung the coat on a peg and walked around the corner to the living room, at which point her muscles instantly ceased all mobility.

Revi stood there in a red dress that fell to mid-calf, where it covered the tops of a pair of high black boots. The matching red bolero-style jacket served to emphasize her small waist, and her long hair was hanging loose,
brushed and shining in the lamplight. She looked stunning, and Seven found herself barely able to think, much less speak.

Revi smiled. “Good to know I can still make you lose all mental cohesion.”

It was difficult to swallow, but Seven managed it. “You speak as if you thought that might be in question. It never was.”

The smile grew softer. “Thank you, darling. I think I needed that.” She walked up to Seven, who appreciatively sniffed the cloud of enticing scent that surrounded her. “I know it’s been a difficult few weeks for you. And I am so grateful to you for being here with me.” She tapped her head. “I’m a lucky woman. When I get trapped inside my own mind, you can come in after me and get me out. Thank you for rescuing me—again.”

Seven shook her head. “You didn’t need rescuing. You just needed comfort and safety while you were processing.”

“Ah, Troi-speak.” Revi’s eyes danced in amusement. “I missed you today. It felt wonderful to know that you were out there having fun, but... it occurred to me that I shouldn’t be relying on Kathryn and Lynne to get you out and show you a good time. I’m glad they’re doing it, but that is primarily my job. And my privilege. Seven, if you’re not too tired, would you like to go out with me tonight?”

Even if Seven had been tired, she’d have said yes. Revi in this dress and this mood was not something to be missed. “I need a shower.”

“Yes, you do.” The suggestion was very clear, both in tone of voice and mental imagery. Seven wished mightily that the guest house had a sonic shower—so much more efficient than a hydroshower, and time was of the essence.

“I’ll be ready in ten minutes,” she said. Hard as it was to turn her back on the vision before her, she exercised a mighty effort of will and left the room, taking the stairs three at a time.

After a very fast shower, she brushed out her hair and left it down, because Revi preferred it that way. It was also with Revi’s tastes in mind that she selected the dark blue dress, knowing that it made the pigmentation of her irises more noticeable. The black faux-leather blazer and boots completed her ensemble, and she raced back down the stairs, eager to see Revi again in that incredible dress.

Her partner was sitting quietly on the couch, looking out the window. As she turned her head, Seven had a sudden vision of the first time she’d
ever seen her. Dirty, damaged, very near total system failure due to not
regenerating for far too long—yet still calm, dignified and utterly in
control of the image she presented. No one ever knew how hard Revi
worked to keep up that appearance.

: *No one but you, darling. Though I think by now both Kathryn and Lynne have a
cue.* : Revi smiled at her. : *That was quite a day, wasn’t it?*

: *It was the best day of my life. I just didn’t know it then.* :

: *Of mine, too. And I did know it. That was the day I chose to live, and you were
a big part of the reason why.* : Revi stood up, her dress swirling about her
calves as she walked across the floor. “You look edible,” she said in a
low voice.

Seven shivered at the sound. Though she treasured their mental link,
much of the time she actually preferred verbal communication just for the
joy of hearing Revi’s voice. The feeling was mutual, and they joked that
their friends would probably be surprised to know just how often they
chose to speak aloud.

“If you’d prefer to dine on me rather than dinner, I’m available,”
she said.

She could feel the shock of her words as Revi’s eyes widened. “Whoa.
You really know how to throw a girl off her stride.”

“It has been—” she decided not to specify the exact number of days—
“too long since we made love. I miss it.”

“I know. I do too. But so much of that is in the head…”

“I understand that.” Seven reached out for her hands and drew her
close. “And I don’t mean to put any pressure on you. You simply want
sensual intimacy right now, and I would enjoy that very much as well. I
just wanted you to know that if you did feel any inclinations toward
making love, I have never lost my desire for it. Or for you. Especially the
way you look right now.”

Revi drew light fingertips down the side of her jaw, then leaned in for a
slow, gentle kiss. “Let’s go to dinner,” she said quietly. “And when we
come home afterward, after I’ve had a whole evening to stare at you in
that outfit, we’ll see what happens.”

“I agree to your conditions. However, the staring will be mutual.”

“Fair enough. Shall we go?”

Kathryn called just as they were putting on their scarves, and Seven
enjoyed watching Revi say she was taking her out to a romantic dinner.
Seeing her decline an invitation while giving such a straightforward reason somehow made their upcoming evening seem even more special. When Revi ended the call, the knowing smile on her face echoed Seven’s feelings.

Since they’d gone to New York City for the previous night’s celebrations, Revi wanted to do something completely different. “I want to take you to a truly romantic place,” she said as they flew to the transport station. “It’s time to start showing you more of Earth than Bloomington and San Francisco.”

“Nouvelle Orleans,” said Seven, reading the name from Revi’s thoughts. “I saw images of it in Voyager’s database. It was originally New Orleans.”

“Right. And images don’t do it justice. It’s a unique city—the only major city in the world that was entirely relocated. Towns and villages have been moved before, but Nouvelle Orleans was a whole different scale.”

“Why was it relocated?”

“Because a lot of the original city was built below sea level, and most of the rest was less than a meter above. It took an entire system of levees and pumps to keep the water out, but the infrastructure was inadequately designed. The beginning of the end was a hurricane that flooded it in the early twenty-first century—just a few years after Lynne was taken off Earth, come to think of it. Then it was flooded twice more in the same decade. After that, the government decided to invest its efforts in relocation rather than rebuilding. The whole city was moved or rebuilt from scratch, and the levees were destroyed to allow a natural ecosystem to reassert itself—which of course helped protect the new city from floods as well.”

“Sensible,” said Seven. “Though I fail to understand why it was built below sea level to begin with. Were the original designers not aware of basic fluid dynamics?”

“Certainly they were. Hence the levees.”

Seven shook her head. There were aspects to humanity that she would never fathom.

The transport station in Nouvelle Orleans was located on the shore of Lake Ponchartrain, so that the first thing new arrivals saw when they emerged was the vast lake stretching southward. As they stood on an
observation platform, Revi pointed across the lake and said, “That’s where New Orleans used to be.”

Seven consulted the map that was considerately provided for visitors. “That’s insane,” she said in disbelief. “It’s a marsh!”

“It is now.”

“And most of it was before the city was built, as well.” Seven was reading in fascination. “The marshes were drained to create land for building, which caused subsidence. They sank their own city.”

“And then pumped the water out. It wasn’t just here, Seven. People did that all over the world. Remind me to take you on a tour of the levee system in the Netherlands. Oh, and you’ll love Venice.” Revi chuckled. “That one will blow your practical mind.”

Seven was warmed by the idea of touring around the world, seeing the things Revi thought would interest her. : Six months will not be enough. :

Revi gave her a slow, loving smile, then pulled her close and kissed her with a passion she had not shown since the night they’d made love in the ski lodge. : A lifetime will not be enough. :

They walked to the city center, hand in hand, enjoying the warm air and the busy nightlife. Nouvelle Orleans had a very different energy from what Seven had felt in New York City the night before, and she decided she liked it. There seemed to be a great deal of general well-being in the people they met, as if the residents here enjoyed their lives and saw no need to hide it. Quite the contrary, in fact—some of them seemed to be flaunting it. It was one such person who helped them choose their restaurant. As they walked past on the sidewalk, a woman at an outdoor table was moaning so happily over her food that it sounded positively sexual. Seven and Revi stopped, looked at each other, and by mutual agreement turned sharply left and went through the door.

Shortly after their first appetizer arrived—a freshly grilled baguette cut in half and topped with shrimp, sweet onions, Havarti cheese and some spices Seven couldn’t identify—they knew exactly why that woman had moaned.

“Oh gods,” said Revi, her eyes closed as she chewed. “This is fantastic. You have to make this at home.”

“If it puts that expression on your face, I’ll make it every night.” Seven didn’t want Revi to feel obligated by her rising desire, but it was impossible to look at the beauty of her companion and not feel the stirrings of
arousal. Revi with her eyes shut, her lips glistening from the rich sauce, her face flushed from the warmth of the restaurant...suddenly Seven understood exactly why sex and food were so closely tied in Human culture. She only wondered why she’d never made the connection before.

Revi opened her eyes and smiled across the table at her. “Hold those thoughts,” she murmured. “I’m feeling the same things, you know.”

“I do know. The only thing I’m uncertain about is whether you want to act on them. And I never want to pressure you.”

“This is going to sound counterintuitive, but sometimes a little bit of pressure at the right time is just what I need.”

Seven stared as Revi raised an eyebrow and took a slow, deliberate bite of her food. Her eyes were riveted to Revi’s lips, which were now curving in a very knowing smile. Shaking her head, she lifted her water glass and tried to cool herself down in the only way she could, short of walking back to the lake and diving in.

They eventually settled into normal conversation and a superlative meal, which came in the form of a steady supply of courses as both of them tried different starters, salads, main dishes and finally, desserts. Revi said that one could not go to Nouvelle Orleans and not get crème brûlée, and Seven had to try the three berry cheesecake. They traded bites back and forth, making sounds not unlike the woman whose vocal enjoyment had brought them in here, and by the time Revi paid the bill, Seven was wishing they could simply go to bed now. The mood was perfect, Revi was relaxed and ready, and she had a feeling that by the time they transported back to Bloomington and drove home, this wonderful glow would be lost.

Revi thanked their waiter and rose. : We don’t have to go home, darling. :

: We don’t? :

With a low laugh that attracted the admiring gazes of two men at the table they were passing, Revi said, “They have hotels in Nouvelle Orleans, you know.” She suddenly stopped, walked back to the men who were still looking at them, and said, “Tell me, if you were going to make love to a beautiful woman and wanted to take her to the best place in town, where would you go?”

Seven was amused by the instant and obvious physiological reactions the question provoked. The two men stammered before one of them managed to say, “I’d take her to Le Duc.”
“Thank you.” Revi smiled at them before turning and reaching for Seven’s hand. “Shall we go to Le Duc, then?"

Seven nodded, unable to stop her own beaming smile. Revi could have said it mentally, but she’d wanted the men to hear her. She’d wanted to advertise the fact that she was taking Seven to bed. And for Seven, such public pride was an even more effective aphrodisiac than the rest of the night so far.

Le Duc turned out to be a short cab ride away, and there was a suite available on the eighth floor. Revi registered her thumbprint and wasted no time pulling Seven by the hand across the airy lobby, without pausing to admire the artwork, architecture, or any other tasteful aspect of the hotel which would normally have engaged her. Despite the city lights visible through the transparent wall of the lift, they spent the ride simply staring at each other, letting the tension build.

By the time they made it through the door of their suite, Seven wouldn’t have cared if it were the Taj Mahal or the most humble shack on the planet. She had eyes only for the vision of Revi, standing in the middle of the suite, slowly dropping her jacket off her arms and tossing it over the nearest chair. The dress was sleeveless, and though the Borg arm might have been a jarring sight for others, to Seven it was simply part of the woman she loved. It had certainly brought her a great deal of pleasure over the course of their relationship—there were things Revi could do with her arm and clamp that an organic hand would never be capable of.

She let her own jacket slide down her arms, stood there for a moment holding it in one hand, and then tossed it atop Revi’s. “So you wanted two complete strangers to know you’re making love to me.”

“Yes, I did. And don’t tell me you didn’t find that to be a turn-on.” Revi stepped up to her and drew her fingertips up one arm. “You were proud of it.”

“Of course I was. You were the most beautiful woman in that restaurant. They wanted you. But they can’t have you, because you…want…me.” She punctuated her last words with nibles to Revi’s throat, then ended by tasting her lips in a kiss that, while soft, nevertheless sent her arousal soaring. When they pulled apart she was already thinking of the things she wanted to do, none of which passed the test of what was appropriate for Revi tonight. Her partner was just now emerging from a
period of emotional trauma, and Seven would never do anything to damage or hinder that process.

“Seven?” Revi’s voice was throaty.

“What?”

“Don’t treat me like an omega molecule that might destabilize at any moment. I’m not that fragile. And tonight, I really don’t want you to hold back.” She sent a series of images down the link that almost exactly mirrored what Seven had been thinking just a few seconds before. “Make me lose control,” she whispered.

As Seven met her in a far deeper kiss, it occurred to her that the omega molecule was not fragile at all. It was the most powerful molecule in the universe, and the Borg had sought it for as long as they had been aware of it. Yet they had never stabilized it, never harnessed it, and the few attempts to do so had failed, resulting in catastrophic destruction to both normal and subspace.

But she had stabilized it on Voyager. For three point two seconds, she had seen what the Collective was trying to capture: absolute power, in a matrix so lovely it had hurt her to look at it.

Revi had not meant it that way. But her analogy was perfect.
Alison woke to the sound of whispering. As she hovered in the gray space between sleeping and waking, she tried to put the words together, but none of it made any sense. Soft lips touched her temple, her cheek, her jaw, and she smiled in a sleepy haze.

“You are so lovely.” This time she made out the words, whispered so softly that they were hardly more than a breath. “So beautiful, my Alison…”

She shifted, wanting to open her eyes but not quite there yet. The lips moved to her shoulder, then nibbled their way down her spine. “You have the most perfect back…”

Past her spine now, and onto some very sensitive skin. Then down further yet, and a gentle hand pushed on her bent knee. “Move your leg, honey.”

At last she came out of her haze, and the realization of who was whispering—and what she was saying—sent a flood of arousal through her system. “Elise?”

The hand became more insistent. “Come on.”

She was lying on her stomach, with one leg partially drawn up. This was the leg Elise was urging her to move, but wouldn’t it be better if she just rolled over? She shifted her arm and began to push up, only to be
stopped with a hand on her back. “No,” Elise murmured. “I want you like this.”

Now she was wide awake, her body instantly thrumming with tension. Silently she moved her leg, opening herself up in a manner that felt far more vulnerable than what she’d done before. Did Elise know what she was asking?

“Perfect,” came the satisfied response. “Oh, yes.”

The first touch of Elise’s tongue sent a sharp shock through her, making her jump. She turned her head, burying her face into the duvet. This was so intimate as to be almost painful.

Elise was slow, deliberate, and extremely gentle, and Alison was soon rocking her hips, trying to press upward, asking silently for more. God, it felt so different this time. She couldn’t speak, couldn’t look up, couldn’t break out of this space she was in. All she could do was feel, and the sensations were overwhelming. Elise was holding her effortlessly captive.

The first sound she made was a small cry of unhappiness when Elise pulled away, leaving her throbbing painfully. She turned her head then, trying to see what was happening, but her position made it impossible. The sense of vulnerability was uncomfortable and extremely arousing all at the same time.

“Don’t worry,” Elise murmured. “We’re not done yet.” Even as she spoke the last word, her fingers were sliding inside.

“Ah, God.” Alison closed her eyes, her hips rising of their own accord. The sense of Elise inside her was shaking her to the very foundation, and she didn’t know why. Was it the position? The fact that she’d been asleep when it started? The time of night, when secretive things happened in the dark? The one thing she knew for sure was that right now, she was not herself. She had given up control before she’d even been aware of it.

Elise was as slow and deliberate now as she’d been before, pressing deeply inside and pausing before pulling nearly all the way out. Alison was moaning with pleasure, her fingers digging into the duvet, wanting her to speed up yet unwilling—or perhaps unable—to ask for it. But Elise seemed to know.

“You want more, don’t you?” she whispered.
Her words unlocked Alison’s will. “Yes.”
“Tell me.”

For a moment she couldn’t. Strange, when she had been so perfectly
clear about her wishes before. But this felt so different in every way, and her voice simply wasn’t there.

“Tell me, Alison.”

It was almost hypnotic. She had never said it to anyone before. But she said it now.

“I want you to take me.”

She felt Elise shifting in place, a hand pressed into the mattress beside her head…and a sudden suction on her throat sent her straight into the stratosphere. Even as she cried out from the unexpected sensation, Elise took her, just as she’d asked.

It was overwhelming, a total assault on her senses, and she was lost. She heard herself vocalizing with every stroke and wondered how long she’d been doing it. Her body was not her own, it was simply reacting, and she was merely along for the ride. A ride driven with absolute assurance by Elise, who pushed her right to the edge of her tolerance.

Just before it became too much, Elise stopped everything, and the shock of that was a whole different kind of arousing. Alison cried out again, trembling with desire, no longer knowing what she wanted. She simply couldn’t think.

“Alison.” Elise’s lips were right next to her ear. “I want you to come. But I can’t do it this way.”

“You…you want me to roll over?”

“No. I want you to take care of yourself.”

“Christ…”

“Just like you did before. That was the most erotic thing I have ever seen in my life, and I want you to do it again. But this time I’ll help you.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Her body was still shaking, and her arms were made of lead.

“You can.”

Elise moved inside her, sending her body into a tiny spasm. She was so far gone already, and yet she wasn’t even close to orgasm. Elise had taken her to a whole new place.

With a superhuman effort, she raised her hips and slid her hand down, finding herself swollen and wet. She pushed further still, reaching for and touching Elise’s hand.

Elise gasped. “Alison…” With a groan of pure arousal, she came back down and began sucking on Alison’s neck once again. Her fingers slid
deeper in, then out, and began pumping once more, not quite so rapidly as before but with enough force to rock Alison’s body with every impact.

Alison kept her hand where it was, wanting to feel Elise, but soon she retreated just far enough to begin stroking herself. She was so sensitized at first that it almost hurt, but as it wore off she increased the speed and pressure, needing her release with a sudden desperation that had her biting her lip. Elise never let up, not for a moment, and the combined sensations pushed Alison rapidly toward the edge, closer and closer, whimpering now in her frantic need. She almost wept with gratitude when the blessed tingling started in her legs. It moved slowly at first, then rushed upward, hitting her hard enough to wrench a loud cry from her throat. Her body folded in on itself as she shook, and when the orgasm finally ended she stayed in that position, feeling more raw and vulnerable than she could quite handle at the moment.

Elise pulled out, bracing herself on either side of her and kissing her across the shoulders and upper back. “You are so beautiful,” she murmured. “Thank you for giving that to me.” When Alison didn’t respond, she lowered herself to the mattress and tugged gently at her shoulders. “Come here. Let me hold you.”

How did she know? Alison uncurled, rolled to her side and tucked her face into Elise’s throat, needing the protection while she gathered the pieces of herself together. For long minutes Elise simply stroked her back, her arm, her hair; letting her find her own way and giving her a comforting space in which to do it.

At last Alison pulled her head back and looked at her. Elise gave her a reassuring smile. “Are you all right?”

She nodded. “But that was...intense.”

“Yes, it was. I’m still recovering from it.”

“You are?”

“You were so beautiful, and so giving, that you broke my heart. It almost made me cry.”

She wasn’t kidding; Alison could see the emotion in her face. “I’ve never done that before,” she said. “Not like that. I don’t think I could have.”

“I think that’s why it broke my heart,” whispered Elise.

Alison reached out to stroke her cheek, feeling a surge of protective- ness as Elise turned her head into the caress. The pure strength of their
emotional dynamic was breathtaking. Elise had held her in the palm of her hand. She had been utterly in control. And now she had not only given it up with perfect ease, but was opening her heart as well, letting Alison see how deeply their connection had affected her.

“Remember when I said this was out of my comfort zone?” asked Alison.

“Yes.”

“I changed my mind. I seem to be more comfortable with you than I ever thought I could be with anyone. I don’t understand it, but…I’m not going to question it, either.”

Elise caught her hand and kissed the palm. “I think you should question it,” she said. “Question it until you get all the answers you need. Question it until you know it’s real.”

“Is it?”

“God, Alison, that felt more real to me than anything I’ve felt in my life. You said you wanted the truth from me? Well, there it is. This is absolutely real to me.”

Alison shook her head, dumbfounded by the trust that had just been laid in her hands. But when she looked up again, she realized that Elise was misinterpreting the motion. She had already drawn back, was already closing off, and Alison couldn’t bear the sight of it.

“Elise, no, I wasn’t denying what you said.” She reclaimed the hand that had held hers a moment before. “I’m just…you amaze me. You’ve got so much strength. You’re risking so much, and it awes me.”

Elise wasn’t convinced. “It’s not much of a risk when you don’t have anything left to lose.”

It was almost flippant, a false bravado that betrayed exactly how much she still had to lose, and how terrified she was of it. Alison could not let her stand in that space alone. She took a deep breath, let it out, and said, “I promised the truth to you, too. So here it is, for better or worse. I’m falling for you. I don’t know how far it’s going to go, but it’s already farther than I’ve ever been. And it scares the shit out of me, because I don’t see how it can happen this quickly, but it is.”

It hung between them in a moment of pure fear for Alison. Elise was staring at her incredulously, but she couldn’t tell if that was good or bad—until the most glorious smile she had ever seen lit up the room, and she was pulled into an embrace.
“Thank you for telling me that.” Elise’s voice caught. “I feel the same way. Thank God we’re both on that page, because it’s a hell of a place to be by yourself.”

“I know.” Alison burrowed happily into the embrace. “Believe me, I know.”

Elise loosened her grip, seeking her out for a sweet kiss that Alison never wanted to end. This was heaven on earth, and they had both earned it by taking a chance. They deserved to soak it up for a while.

“That’s it,” she said when they finally broke apart. “There is no fucking way I’m going to work tomorrow.”
Elise laughed. “Calling in sick, are you?”
“Well, I have heard it called the sickness of love.”
“And to think I was sure I’d been vaccinated.”
“Thought you were immune?” Alison could relate to that.
“Oh, yes. Right up until the moment you wouldn’t accept my advances last Saturday. Then I realized I wasn’t immune at all.”
“You just weren’t used to rejection,” Alison teased.
Elise shook her head. “I just wasn’t used to having a rejection matter.”
The serious response immediately brought Alison down from her light manner. “You do know that wasn’t really a rejection, right?”
“Intellectually, yes. But it felt like it. Especially after I made that recording and fell apart on everyone. I started to feel like I had no place in this club, you know? And I am nobody’s charity case,” she finished firmly.
“Oh good God. As if it were even possible. I don’t do that kind of charity anyway.”

“Of course you do. Look at how you took care of me for three days. We weren’t lovers when you brought me home, and that clearly wasn’t your intent.”

“No, but I wouldn’t have taken just anyone home with me for three days, either. I took you because…” She paused, trying to determine exactly when it was that Elise had come to mean so much to her.
“Because?”

“Because you touched something inside me, and I knew that much before I knew how or when or why. I’m just trying to think when it started, and…I think it was that night in my office, when Commander Tuvok was healing your nose.”
Elise snorted. “Oh, that’s the image I want you to remember. You have
no idea how humiliating that was. If I could surgically remove that memory from my brain, I would. And yours, too.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. I wouldn’t let anyone take that from me even at the point of a phaser.” At the look of surprise, she added, “That’s the night I saw you in a whole different way. And I’m not talking about the embarrassing aspect. You looked at me while Commander Tuvok was using the regenerator and you had…I don’t know, it was almost a kind of grace. You were bleeding and hurt and scared, but you just looked at me with a...a calm acceptance, and it really got me. I couldn’t get you out of my mind after that.”

Elise had gone still, and her face was shuttered. After a moment of silence she said, “Grace? You thought I had grace? That’s exactly what you said I didn’t have. When you tore me a new asshole, which was right after Commander Tuvok healed my nose. What the hell? How can you say that?”

Alison groaned internally. If she’d been thinking with more than half of her brain, she’d have seen that one a kilometer away and kept herself from stepping right into it. Taking Elise’s hand, she squeezed it and said, “I was angry and I spoke without thinking, and I’ve already apologized for it, but if you want me to do it again, I will.”

Elise shook her head. “No, that’s not necessary. I just don’t understand what you’re saying. It sounds like you tore me apart for not having something that you saw in me just a few minutes before. Which is not to say I didn’t deserve it, because I did, but I’m more confused now than ever.”

“Agghh.” Alison let her head drop to the pillow. “God I am fucking this up.” She propped herself back up again and said, “I’m sorry. I’m really not good at these kinds of conversations when someone has just turned me inside out with a soul-shattering lovemaking session.” That earned her a small smile, though Elise still wasn’t at ease, and she searched for a way to explain. “Okay. Let me try to tell you what I saw. You got yourself into a bad situation, and scared the shit out of both of us, and you knew you might just have thrown away your reputation. I saw it in your eyes. You knew I could tell that story far and wide and you’d never recover from it.”

“I knew.” It was almost a whisper.

“Right. But you didn’t say a word. You just looked at me, almost like
you were accepting a judgment. It went right through me. I think that was the moment I made a connection with you.”

“And you can go from that to the kind of anger you showed me not two minutes later? Fuck!” There was real fear in her face, as if she were questioning what she’d gotten herself into, and Alison felt the hole she was in growing deeper by the second.

“That wasn’t exactly a normal situation,” she said, forcing her voice to stay calm. “And you don’t know the history behind it. You don’t know that the day those Cardassians went after Lynne at the ski resort, she and Kathryn and Revi and Seven all came straight here because, just like you said, I was the only one who knew where they were. Lynne thought I’d betrayed her. They walked in my house and Lynne pressed me up against my own goddamned living room wall and I honestly thought she might hurt me. It’s a good thing I didn’t know then what I know now, or I’d probably have wet myself.”

Elise’s eyes were wide. “No, I didn’t know! So she came straight here after killing three Cardassians? And I’ll bet she was furious.”

“Actually it was more like icy cold, which was even more frightening than if she’d been overtly angry. It was like she was waiting for me to give her an excuse to let herself go.”

“I can’t even imagine.”

“I was pretty shocked. I’d been on their side all this time, and my reward was to be threatened in my own living room by the very woman I was trying to protect.”

“Okay, now I want to have a talk with her,” Elise announced, and Alison smiled.

“You’ll have to get in line behind my aunt. But don’t bother, Lynne and I had that out already. Anyway, the point is that after going through all that, five days later I got the exact same suspicion from you. Lynne came into my house to accuse me, and you broke into my office to find evidence against me. I made a connection with you, yes, but when you told me why you were there, I just snapped. I’d had it with everyone suspecting me of doing exactly what I had been fighting against for a year.”

Elise nodded. “All right. That makes sense. It still scares me a little bit, because believe me when I tell you that you really know how to hurt a person when you’re angry.”

Alison suddenly remembered Lynne looking at her in the lobby of the
Presidential Office, tears rising to her eyes because of the cruel question Alison had asked in her anger. She had never thought about herself in this way, but maybe it was something she needed to consider.

“I’m sorry. All I can say is that I’m usually much better at controlling it. Have you ever seen me lose it in a board meeting? And we’ve had some pretty intense ones.”

“Yes, we have, and you’re totally in control even when you’re angry, but that’s professional. It’s completely different from the personal.”

“Not for me, it isn’t. The principles of acceptable behavior are the same.”

Elise looked at her in silence, then exhaled softly. “I’ll just have to trust you on that one. Just—be careful with me, okay? You have my heart and I’ve never given it before, and it’s not a very comfortable feeling.”

“I know it’s not. We’re on the same page, remember? And you’re not the only nervous one in the room. I’m still scared that once you get your feet under yourself again, you may not feel the same way about me as you do now.” She hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but Elise’s total openness was making her respond in kind.

“That’s difficult to imagine. Don’t forget that I was already pursuing you before Mom was arrested. I didn’t suddenly develop an attraction because you took me home. And yes, it’s true that it didn’t start turning into something else until my world fell apart, but I honestly don’t believe that’s the cause. If anything, I should have been more cautious after that, not less.”

She had a point, and Alison felt a sudden surge of affection. “I guess I’ll just have to trust you on that one.”

Elise smiled. “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Maybe you came along just in time for me.”

I hope so. Suddenly it wasn’t enough to simply lie beside her. She nudged Elise onto her back and climbed on top, enjoying the access to previously unreachable parts of her face and throat. The moon had risen over the peaks, its silver light pouring through the wall of windows and clearly outlining the beauty of Elise’s face. After a flurry of kisses Alison raised her head and simply gazed at her, mesmerized by the way her eyes were almost glowing.

“You have the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen,” she said.

“Thank you. And thank you for waiting until now to say it.”
“You hear that a lot, don’t you?”

She nodded. “Usually as part of the seduction. But I don’t think you’re after me for my looks.”

“Or your money, or your connections.” Alison ran a light finger down her throat, ending by pressing her palm to the chest just beneath her own. It was the same gesture Elise had used in the kitchen what seemed like half a lifetime ago, and she saw the recognition in her face. “I’m after you for Elise,” she whispered.

With a small sound Elise wrapped her up and squeezed her tightly—but not before Alison saw the tear slip down her face, shining in the moonlight.
Dhara looked at the electronic card in her hand one more time, checking it against the number on the door in front of her. Yes, this was the place. She put the card back into her purse, looked nervously around the corridor, and finally pressed the entrance chime.

The door opened immediately, revealing a woman Revi’s age, with long, dark, curly hair and almost black eyes. She offered Dhara a friendly smile. “You must be Dhara Sandovhar.”

“Yes, I’m Revi’s mother.”

The woman held out her hand. “Deanna Troi. I’m so glad you could be here today. Please, come inside.”

Dhara shook her hand and allowed herself to be escorted into the room. It was more comfortable than she’d expected, considering it was at Starfleet Headquarters. “Do I call you Counselor Troi?”

“If you want. When I’m counseling Starfleet clients, they usually prefer to use that title because they’re used to titles. But I’m perfectly happy for you to call me Deanna. It’s your choice.”

“I think…I’d prefer to call you Counselor Troi.” Deanna seemed far too intimate for this woman in a commander’s uniform. And Revi called her by her title.

“Then Counselor Troi it is. May I call you Dhara, or would you prefer Ms. Sandovhar?”
“Dhara is fine.”

“All right then, the formalities are officially over. Have a seat, anywhere you’d like. Can I get you something from the replicator?” she asked, walking toward the dispenser on the far wall.

“No, thank you,” said Dhara, looking over her seating options. The couch was too big for one person, so she chose one of the armchairs and sat, straight-backed and ill at ease, waiting for this ‘session’ to begin.

Troi ordered a glass of water and carried it back over. Setting it on the coffee table, she sat comfortably in the other armchair. “If you’d like something at any time, just let me know. Talking can be thirsty work. Revi told you that I’m empathic, yes?”

“Yes, she did.”

“Do you have any issues with that? I won’t assume that your agreement to this appointment means you don’t.”

“I can’t say that I find it entirely comfortable, but I can certainly see the advantages in your line of work.”

Troi nodded. “There are a lot of advantages, yes. And may I just say that I admire your willingness to come here despite feeling a little uncomfortable around an empath. It says a great deal about what you hope to accomplish, and how much you’re willing to do to get there. Even when it’s not comfortable or easy.”

She hadn’t expected that, and it made her feel a little more at ease. Troi realized that this was hard for her.

Well, of course Troi knew that. She was an empath. Dhara shook her head; this was going to take some getting used to. At least in her link with Revi, the emotional understanding had gone both ways.

“I would also like to give you my condolences for your loss,” Troi continued. That brought Dhara’s head up.

“My loss?” Perhaps the counselor had mixed up her files. “I think you may have some wrong information. I haven’t lost anyone.”

“In a way, you have. You lost the husband you thought you had, didn’t you? And you lost the childhood you thought Revi had.”

Dhara stared in shock. She really did understand.

“It’s been very difficult,” she finally answered. “I don’t know how to talk to my husband. And I barely know how to talk to my daughter. I came here because Revi said that you could help both of us, but I understand that your first loyalty will be to her.”
“No. This is very important for you to understand. My first loyalty is to the truth. And sometimes your truth might be a little different from Revi’s. I will do my utmost to help you, and for me there’s no conflict between helping you and helping Revi. But there’s something I think you should know. Had you come to me on your own and asked for my counseling services, I would almost certainly have referred you to a colleague. Because in that instance, my loyalty would have been to Revi, in that she came to me first, and I could probably not have been an effective counselor for her once I had informed her that I was seeing you as well. But because Revi called me and asked for this herself, I’m free to put that concern aside.”

“I understand that.”

“Do you understand what it means that Revi asked me to help you?”

Dhara shrugged. She had no ready answer, and was already feeling a little overwhelmed.

“It means she’s looking past her own pain and seeing yours. And that is a very good sign of progress.”

“It is?” Suddenly she had a point of focus. Revi was making progress?

Before Troi could answer, the door chime rang. Troi rose, leaving Dhara nervously wishing she’d asked for a glass of water after all. Her mouth was suddenly very dry as she waited.

“Good morning, Counselor.”

She closed her eyes at the sound of her daughter’s voice, her nervousness increasing.

“Good morning. You’re right on time. Internal chronometer?” Dhara heard footsteps entering the room, and the swish of the door closing.

“Of course.” A pause. “Hello, Mother.”

Such a change in tone between the way she’d addressed Troi and the way she was speaking now. Dhara opened her eyes and turned her head to see her daughter walking toward her.

“Good morning,” she managed.

“Revi, do you want anything?”

“Just the usual vodka, please.”

Troi laughed as she walked to the replicator. “One hot chocolate coming up.”

Revi settled onto the couch and gazed at Dhara across the coffee table. “I’m really glad you could come, Mother. I think we both need this.”
Dhara nodded, her throat even more dry now. She looked over at Troi, who was just now pulling a mug from the replicator. “Counselor Troi... may I have a glass of water as well?”

“Of course.” Troi put in the request, then walked back with her hands full. “Here you go,” she said, handing the clear glass to Dhara. “And my special program hot chocolate.”

They both thanked her, then fell into a mutual silence as Troi took her own seat. Apparently unaffected, Troi said, “I was just telling Dhara that your invitation to her was a sign of significant progress.”

“Well, I don’t know about significant,” said Revi.

“Certainly it is. When we’re hurting very badly, we tend to curl up and protect ourselves, and we just don’t have the ability to see anything else. But you’ve uncurled a little bit, and now you’re seeing Dhara. Well enough to understand that she is also hurting because of this.”

Revi met Dhara’s eyes. “Yes,” she said quietly. “It’s pretty hard to miss now.”

“Dhara, I want you to know that this was not my idea. Revi proposed this, and I agreed for a number of reasons. But what I think might be most important for you to realize is that Revi asked for this because she wants to help you. Think about that for a minute: your daughter wants to help you.”

Dhara looked back at Revi. “She’s always been like that. From the time she was a child. She was so sensitive to the moods of everyone around her, and she always wanted to cheer people up if they were down. Especially me. Well, until...” She trailed off, unable to complete the sentence, watching as Revi hid her face by sipping her hot chocolate. “I keep thinking about all the signs and clues that I missed,” she said. “Looking back at it now, I realize that I did see them, I just found other explanations for them. Revi stopped trying to cheer me up when she entered her teen years. I thought it was just typical teenage self-centeredness. But I forgot that she was not a typical teenager. I should have known there was another reason.”

“You’re looking back at this with perfect hindsight,” said Troi. “You may not have been as blind as you think. And you had a powerful reason not to give credence to the possibility of abuse. You had a husband you believed in and trusted. You should have been able to depend on that trust, just as Revi should have been able to depend on her trust in her
father. Both of you have had your trust violated, and that’s a very difficult thing to deal with.”

Dhara felt the tears pricking the backs of her eyes. They were never far off these days. “It makes me wonder how much of my marriage has been a lie. He lied about the single most important thing in our lives—our child. How could he? That’s the one thing I most want to know. How could he do it to her? I don’t understand it. And I can’t ask him, because he won’t even acknowledge that it happened. So I keep going over it and over it, trying to put the pieces together, and I’m driving myself insane with it. Every piece I do put together just hurts me that much more. Do you know what Revi told me when we met earlier this week?”

Troi shook her head, and Revi looked apprehensive.

“She said the reason she never let me see her wounds was because she didn’t want either of us to know how much it mattered to her. She said that Nishad could beat her, but he couldn’t break her. He couldn’t break her. Gods, I don’t think I will ever get those words out of my mind. And yesterday I had the most horrifying realization. I was remembering some of the times when Nishad and I talked after he had...after…” She couldn’t bring herself to say it out loud.

“After he beat her?” asked Troi in a neutral tone.

She nodded, focusing on the counselor, unable to look at her daughter’s face. “And I remembered how he would say that she was too willful, and we had to break her of that before it set in and became a lifelong characteristic. It’s such an ordinary term, isn’t it? I heard parents say that about their children all the time—‘we have to break her of that habit.’ But yesterday I realized...Nishad meant that. He wasn’t speaking metaphorically, like other parents. He really was trying to break her. And Revi...oh gods...” She had to look at her then, and their eyes locked. “She wouldn’t let him. There was a battle going on in my house, between my husband and my daughter, and I didn’t see it.”

Revi’s gaze sharpened, though Dhara couldn’t read the expression on her face.

“Would it be accurate to say that Nishad sees himself as the authority figure in your family?” asked Troi.

A sardonic smile appeared on Revi’s lips as she looked over at Troi. “Oh yes. That would be extremely accurate. He saw himself as the captain...
of a very small, very tightly-run ship. Both Mother and I were supposed to take orders. I wasn’t as good at it as she was.”

The sarcasm hurt, but there was little Dhara could say to it.

“Dhara, how often did you challenge his authority?”

Startled to be asked the question, it took her a moment to respond.

“Directly? Almost never. That’s not how I was raised. And I know that Revi thinks less of me because of it. But the one thing she never realized is that there are ways to deal with a spouse other than direct confrontation. If something is important to me, I usually get it one way or another. I’m just more subtle about it. Revi tackles things head on, and could never understand why that didn’t work with Nishad.”

Now Revi’s expression had closed off, and Dhara knew what she was thinking just as clearly as if they’d been in that interlink.

“You said you almost never challenged him. Which means that there have been times when you did. How did he react to those events?”

It was easier to look at Troi. “He always gets angry. Always. Which is the main reason why I always worked around him.”

Troi nodded. “How many of the arguments between him and Revi do you think came about because she ‘tackled things head on,’ as you put it?”

“Most of them…maybe all of them. Do you know, they used to have fun with each other. He adored her and she would do anything to make him proud of her. But when she got older—maybe eleven, definitely by the time she was twelve—all of that ended. She started questioning the things he said, and talking back to him, and their relationship was never the same.”

“So in that sense, she did become a typical teenager. Questioning authority is one of the psychological hallmarks of that phase of growth.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“I think perhaps you have the answer to your question, then. You said you want to know how Nishad could do that to Revi. Based on what she has told me, and what you’ve just said, it sounds as if Nishad never learned to handle challenges to his authority without feeling threatened by them. And a typical response to threat is anger. Revi entered a normal teenage phase of questioning authority. But what most parents would see as a phase, Nishad saw as a threat. He responded with a level of anger that was inappropriate for a parent, but in his mind appropriate to that threat. I believe you’re correct, Dhara. He was trying to break her. He was
trying to force her back to her earlier growth phase, when her primary goal was pleasing him rather than challenging him.”

Dhara was dazed by this interpretation. She needed time to think about it, to reexamine their family history against this template. But one thing became instantly clear. “If that’s true, then he’ll never acknowledge what happened. Because he’ll never see it as inappropriate.”

“I can’t say that. I have no knowledge of him. People do mature and change, sometimes much later in life than we would expect or prefer. Perhaps he understands now that what he did was wrong, but he’s too ashamed to acknowledge it.”

Dhara shook her head, even as she heard the snort from Revi. Troi’s suggestion was generous, but she knew Nishad. His anger had been a constant throughout their entire marriage.

“How do I live with him if he won’t acknowledge this?” It was the question she’d been asking herself every day.

Troi looked at her sympathetically. “We’ll talk about that. You will need to decide what you can and cannot live with. But it’s only been a few days since you confronted him with your knowledge. Things may change.”

She doubted that. “Will things change with Revi?”

“Dhara, look at where you are and why you’re here. Things are already changing with Revi. She’s an extremely strong woman. And she’s reaching out to you.”

“I know,” said Dhara, meeting her daughter’s eyes again. She thought of all the times Revi had argued with Nishad, refusing to accept his orders or arguments, demanding reason and evidence—and for so many of those years, she had argued with him knowing that she ran a terrible risk. She had paid the price over and over, and still she would not back down. Had she thought her daughter willful? It wasn’t even remotely the right word for her strength of will. And Nishad had never given in, either. “It’s ironic, really,” she added. “She hates her father now, but they’re alike in so many ways. She got her strength from him.”

“The hell I did,” said Revi. “Maybe he beat it into me, but he sure didn’t show me by example.”

“I agree with Revi, though I wouldn’t state it quite that way,” said Troi. “Any man who feels threatened by his child, and who resorts to abuse to save his sense of authority and power, is not strong. Abuse is almost invariably committed by the weak of mind.”
Suddenly Dhara remembered Revi’s last words to her after their interlink. *Father will always be a coward, won’t he?*

“If Revi inherited her strength from one of her parents,” Troi continued, “she inherited it from you.”

Both of them looked at Troi in disbelief. “I’m not strong,” Dhara said.

“Of course you are. You defied a belief system you’ve held for most of your life in order to link with Revi. You defied your husband as well, knowing that you were breaking one of his core beliefs. In that link, you put yourself into a situation completely beyond your experience, and in which you had every reason to be afraid of the possible results. Those don’t sound like the actions of a weak woman to me.”

“But…that’s not…I only did those things because of Revi.”

“Mother, that’s not true. You did those things because you wanted to prove to me that Father loves me. You didn’t do it for me or for you, you did it for him.”

“No. That’s not the only reason. It’s not even the main reason. You needed me. You didn’t know it, and maybe you never will, but a mother can see that in her child. You needed both of us, but Nishad would never have met you halfway. So I did.”

“You did what you had to,” said Troi.

“Yes!”

“And why would neither of you see that as a sign of strength? You could have let Revi walk away from your house and never come back. It would have been much easier for you. Certainly it would have been easier on your marriage.”

“But then she would have been gone forever. I’ve already lost her once; I won’t lose her again. I don’t care about the rest. Well, I do, gods, it’s been so hard, but…she’s more important.”

Revi stared at her in shock. “I am?”

“How can you not know this, even after our interlink? You are my daughter. I love you!”

“I know that! But that doesn’t translate to what you just said.”

“What?” Dhara threw her hands up in frustration. “Yes it does! How much clearer can I be?”

“Dhara,” said Troi in a very calm voice, “Let me see if I understand you correctly. Are you saying that Revi’s well-being is more important to you than the consequences that the truth is having on your marriage?”
“I…” Dhara stopped, suddenly overwhelmed by the memory of Revi on the sidewalk outside their house, tears rolling down her face as she’d shouted, *Stop defending him! Just once in your life, defend me! Just once!*

She looked at Troi, her own tears beginning to overflow. “I never thought I’d have to choose. But I have, haven’t I? I defended her, for once in my life, and my marriage is falling apart because of it. And I could fix that—all I have to do is go to Nishad and apologize, and tell him I was wrong and it will never come up again. That’s what he needs. But I can’t give it to him. I can’t bury the truth. Not now that I know it.” For the first time, she noticed the box of tissues strategically placed on the coffee table. Pulling one out, she dabbed at her cheeks and said, “Revi, if your well-being wasn’t more important to me than anything else in the world, I’d be home making up with Nishad right now. But if I do that, I’ll lose you. I *hate* the fact that I have to choose. I shouldn’t have to! Don’t you see how hard this is?”

Revi seemed to be on the verge of tears as well. “I guess I never thought of it that way.”

“What way?”

“That you would have to choose. I mean…” she gestured helplessly. “I did. I wanted you to choose me. But I guess I never really thought that through, what that would mean for you on the other end.”

“It means my family is falling apart.” Dhara’s voice shook as she tried to hold it all back. “I was so happy when you came home, gods, I thought the sun was shining in our lives at last. All those years I thought you were dead, and then I learned you were alive but you might never come home, and then there you were, standing on the front step like a gift from all the gods above and below us. For about five minutes I thought we would be a whole family again. And now it’s all coming apart.”

“Mother…” Revi’s voice was strained as well. “I’m not saying this to be cruel, really I’m not—but our family fell apart twenty-five years ago. You’re only realizing it now.”

Dhara closed her eyes and held the tissue against them with both hands.

“Perhaps that’s something you can consider, Revi,” said Troi. “You’ve long since accepted the loss of your family—at least, your family as you wanted it to be. But for Dhara, this loss is brand new. She’s in the first stage, where the pain is at its sharpest. She could use your support.”
“Yes,” said Revi in a softer tone. “I know that now. And I’m starting to figure something else out, too.”

Dhara raised her head, meeting her daughter’s eyes and waiting for the next wounding thing she would say. But Revi’s expression was sympathetic, even sorrowful.

“He hurt both of us, Mother. But the blows are just now landing on you.”
This time it was Alison who woke first. Given the level of light in the room, she knew it was far past her normal rising time—but then again, she hadn’t gotten much sleep the night before. Thank God she’d had the strength of will to drag herself out of bed earlier and leave that message for Matthew. He would already have gotten it by now, and the word would be out at the Foundation that she wasn’t coming in. Which meant that she could lie here and bask in the bliss of a day off, a warm bed, and a new lover.

She stretched luxuriously, wincing at a few sore muscles, and scooted closer to Elise. In the full morning light streaming through the windows, Elise looked even more beautiful than before. Her face was more relaxed than Alison had ever seen it, and her normally impeccable hair was just mussed enough to qualify as adorable, though Alison wasn’t sure she would appreciate such a characterization.

They had finally managed to crawl under the covers after their middle-of-the-night lovemaking session, but since Alison hadn’t remembered to turn down the environmental controls, both of them were quite warm. She soon discovered that the only thing better than Elise’s breasts in the middle of the night were her breasts in the sleepy warmth of morning. They were wonderfully scented and so soft, and she guiltily enjoyed the pleasure of caressing them without direct involvement from their owner.
Elise shifted, her hair falling across her face as she turned her head, and Alison stopped to watch. God in heaven, how had she ever gotten so lucky? This woman took her breath away, and she ached with a fullness of emotion that seemed too much for her heart to hold. Gently she tucked the hair back behind Elise’s ear, caressing her cheek before pushing herself upward and dropping a soft kiss there. “Now I understand why you were whispering to me last night,” she breathed, moving her lips to Elise’s jaw and kissing her again. “You couldn’t keep it inside, could you? It’s like emotion under pressure, pushing its way out.”

She kissed a line down Elise’s throat, then returned to the warm breasts that were beckoning. “You have the most perfect breasts…I’m sorry, but I can’t help myself.”

As she took a soft, sleepy nipple into her mouth, Elise shifted again. “Why are you apologizing?” she mumbled.

Alison gently released the nipple and planted a tender kiss on it. “Well, it does feel a bit like I’m taking advantage.”

“Mmm. Please do, it feels nice.”

Having been given free license, Alison happily availed herself of it, enjoying the quiet sounds Elise made as her breasts were lovingly handled. Eventually a hand began stroking her back, and with some reluctance Alison dropped a final farewell kiss and raised her head. “Good morning.”

“It is a good morning.” Elise smiled up at her. “Can I put in a request to be woken up this way every day?”

“Every day we wake up together, yes. Assuming I don’t have to scramble out of bed and get to work.”

Elise caressed the side of her face. “You’re even gorgeous first thing in the morning.”

“Funny, that’s just what I was thinking about you.” She noticed that Elise’s gaze had fixed itself on her throat. “What? Do I have marks?”

“Oh, honey, you have quite a few of them.” A rather self-satisfied smile settled on Elise’s lips. “I was apparently a bit of a bear last night. For which I can’t find the slightest shred of regret.”

“Neither can I.” Alison didn’t quite know how to tell her what last night had meant to her. If even half the rumors she’d heard about Elise were true, this woman had far more experience than she did—and she
hadn’t exactly been a nun. So how did one say thank you for the fantastic sex without sounding like every other lover the morning after?

“Last night was spectacular,” said Elise, taking the decision right out of her hands. “It changes things a lot when there’s real emotion involved.”

“You’ve never felt real emotion for any of your lovers? I don’t believe that.”

“For a few, yes, but not like this. I told you—I’ve never given my heart away before. Did you think that would change by the light of day?”

“Not exactly. I guess I’m still…nervous, maybe. And a bit incredulous. Give me a little time, it’s only been a few hours.”

“I’m hoping we have a lot of time.”

“Me too. Elise…” She hesitated.

“What?”

“Thank you for trusting me.” It was the best way she could express her feelings.

Elise caressed her face once more, a sweet smile lighting her own. “You make it easy. Thank you for trusting me. You’re taking a leap of faith too.”

“Not as big as yours.”

“You’re referring to Mom, aren’t you?”

Alison wasn’t sure if she’d stepped in it or not. “I just meant—”

“That I shouldn’t be trusting you because of her? Alison, please. That’s not how it works. Having one person fail my trust doesn’t mean I automatically expect everyone else in the world to follow. And I especially don’t expect it of you.”

Yes, but that ‘one person’ happened to be your mother. “Why not?” she asked.

“Because you’ve already proven yourself. That’s one of the things that first attracted me to you. My only worry is that your feelings might change, and if that happens, well—there’s not much you can do about it, is there? But at least I know you’ll tell me the truth. And I think that’s all any of us can ask for.”

“Jesus. When did you get so enlightened?”

“When I learned the hard way that life happens whether you know about it or not. I’d rather know. I think what’s hurting me more than anything else about Mom is the sheer shock of it. I had no idea.”

Alison recognized a fellow logical mind at work. Elise was finding ways to explain and categorize her emotions as a means of dealing with
them. It wouldn’t help to point out that even if she had known about her mother’s activities, she would have been just as horrified.

“Well, at least Melanie came through in the end,” she said. “If she hadn’t given you that communication code, this still wouldn’t be over.”

“It isn’t over for me. Or for Mom. But I’m very glad it is for Lynne and Kathryn.” She frowned. “There’s one thing that’s been bothering me about that, though.”

“What’s that?”

“They told us that Lynne would be on the Tagus. They lied to us. It wasn’t Lynne, it was their Doctor. So why did they feel it necessary to keep that little tidbit to themselves? Because of me? I mean, I couldn’t blame them for not trusting me, but…that’s still a little hard to handle.”

Alison shook her head. “Take it from the niece of an admiral. That wasn’t personal, and it wasn’t aimed at you. That was a Starfleet captain laying down a strategic plan and making sure that nobody outside the inner circle had a clue. Lynne said that even the captain of the Tagus had no idea. Kathryn probably wouldn’t have told my Aunt Alynna if she hadn’t been a direct supervisor.”

Elise considered that. “You’re sure?”

“Oh yes. Aunt Alynna and I play the ‘need to know’ game all the time. There are things I have to keep confidential from her because of my job, and a lot of things she has to keep confidential from me because of hers. You should have seen us dancing around our obligations when we were trying to deal with my suspicions about Voyager.”

“I can imagine.” Elise suddenly seemed subdued. “You know what? Much as I’m enjoying snuggling with you, I really need a shower. If you’ll let me borrow that very attractive fuzzy robe of yours, I’ll run out to the hovercraft and get my overnight bag.”

Alison was disappointed; she’d been looking forward to more snuggling than this. But then again, they’d been pretty active the night before. “Wouldn’t you like a little breakfast first?”

She shook her head. “I’d rather shower first and eat after.”

“Okay. The robe is on the hook there by the door.”

“Thanks.” Elise leaned in for a soft kiss, then sidled away, threw the covers back and walked across the room. Alison watched in frank appreciation, barely managing to keep her eyeballs in her head as Elise reached up for the robe. But she was caught a moment later when Elise pulled on
the robe and turned, a knowing grin spreading across her face. “See anything you like?”

“I see everything I like,” said Alison honestly.

“Oh…” Tightening the belt, Elise came straight back to the bed. “That deserves a kiss.” She leaned down and took her time, ravaging Alison’s mouth thoroughly before pulling back and smiling at her. “Thank you.”

“Oh, no,” said Alison. “Thank you.”

Elise turned and was gone a moment later, leaving Alison to flop happily back in the warm bed and relive that last kiss. Eventually she heard Elise’s footsteps on the front porch, then had a sudden thought. Sitting up in bed, she scanned the floor of the room. Yes, there were Elise’s boots. A quick glance showed her own slippers were absent, though, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Hope they fit her.

She burrowed back under the covers, appreciating the warmth even more while imagining Elise out there in the brisk air of a Colorado morning. Too bad she hadn’t brought her bag in last night. But then, they’d never really had time.

The footsteps came back up the porch, and Alison tingled as she waited for Elise’s reappearance. There she was on the stairs…now she was coming down the hall…She frowned as the guest bathroom door slid shut. What?

When the water turned on, she sat bolt upright and threw the covers back. Why the hell wasn’t Elise using the master bath?

She never has, and you didn’t tell her to. She probably feels more comfortable in the guest bath.

All right, then. It was time for her shower, too.

She opened the bathroom door and stopped, frozen by the sight of the body behind the shower wall. “Elise?” The first attempt came out as little more than a croak. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Elise!”

Elise poked her head around the edge of the wall, her hair slicked back as she wiped water from her face. “What?”

Alison was surprised her legs were still holding her up, given the weakness that had just swept through her muscles at this déjà vu. “Jesus Christ, you are a fantasy,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you.”

“Do you mind if I join you?” she managed in a louder voice.

“Not at all. Please do.” Elise smiled at her and vanished again. But this
time Alison had the right to follow. A few steps took her past the boundary of politeness and around the wall, where Elise was already soaping up her body. Which was truly a wasted opportunity.

“May I?” she asked, holding her hand out for the scrubber.

Elise handed it over and stood quietly as Alison began the process of making sure that not a square centimeter of skin went untouched. Her breasts probably didn’t need that much lather, but one could never be too careful.

“Turn around,” she said, and held her breath as Elise obligingly turned, bracing her hands on the wall and dropping her head as Alison began working on the flawless plane of her back. “Lovely,” Alison murmured. “You really are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

Elise didn’t respond, but Alison hardly noticed as she dropped to her knees to take care of Elise’s legs. She nudged them apart a bit more, slowly drawing the scrubber up and down their length, then let it fall to the tile and used her hand to gently clean the most delicate area of all. She would have loved to stay there and take advantage of the position, but the soap had to go first. Rising to her feet, she wrapped her arms around Elise and squeezed. “Okay, honey, you can rinse.”

Elise straightened, holding Alison’s hands on her stomach and leaning back into her. “Did you just call me honey?”

Surprised, Alison let out a short laugh. “I guess I did. Must have picked that up from you.”

Elise patted her arms, a signal for release, and stepped under the water to rinse. As she turned in place, Alison openly ogled, not even remotely embarrassed when Elise stopped, hands on hips, and waited for her to drag her eyes back up to her face.

“Be careful you don’t injure your jaw,” she said, putting a finger under Alison’s chin and gently pushing upward.

“Hey, it wasn’t open that far. But I do have a very good reason for it.” Alison shivered a little. “Can we trade places?”

“Sure.” Elise scooped the scrubber from the tiles and made room for Alison, who yelped as the water hit her stomach.

“Aghh! Fuck, that’s hot!”

“Sorry,” said Elise, not looking sorry at all. “I like my showers toasty.”

“You like your showers boiling! Jesus!” Alison had to turn it down a little. “Ohh, much better. I don’t know how you have any skin left.” She
turned under the stream, absorbing the now-tolerable heat with enjoyment.

“My turn,” said Elise, putting a hand on her shoulder to stop her movement. She started on Alison’s arms and shoulders, then got a bit sidetracked on her breasts.

“Those aren’t all that dirty,” Alison said.

“Neither were mine,” Elise pointed out without looking up. But she did eventually move lower, soaping up her stomach, flanks and sides as Alison basked in the attention. Then she held out the scrubber. “Here, hold this, will you?”

Alison took it automatically, surprised when Elise instantly covered both breasts with her hands and took full advantage of their soapy slipperiness. “Oh, that feels—whoa!” Elise was gently pinching her nipples, and the response was instant. “Don’t do that if you don’t want to start something.”

“Have we actually finished?” But Elise took pity on her, retrieving the scrubber and finishing her cleaning job. As Alison rinsed off, Elise shampooed her hair, and they traded places once again. Alison had less pity than Elise, however, and simply could not keep her hands off the breasts that were being presented to her as Elise leaned back into the water.

“Alison!” But Elise could do nothing, not while she was trying to keep rinsewater out of her eyes, and Alison pushed it as far as she could take it. Elise straightened, wiped her eyes, and glared. “All right, you asked for it.”

Alison backed away, laughing, but there was nowhere to go. Elise grabbed her, spun her around and yanked her back against her body, one arm across her chest and the other reaching down. Alison’s mirth swiftly changed to arousal as she was held in place by the fingers on her nipple and the pressure of Elise’s arms, and Elise wasted no time at all. In bare moments Alison’s hips were rocking. She leaned back against the body behind her, feeling deliciously trapped and loved.

“You realize that was a bad idea, don’t you?” Elise said into her ear.

“Looks like it worked out…pretty well…to me,” Alison managed. She held onto Elise’s arm, her head going back as the arousal climbed. “God, Elise…”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let me go,” Alison whispered.

Elise kissed the side of her throat. “I won’t,” she promised.
Alison bit her bottom lip, incapable of any further conversation as she gave herself over to the pleasure Elise seemed to bring so easily. And when she came, crying out as her body thrashed, Elise held her tightly, driving her straight through it until she couldn’t handle any more.

“Okay! Okay! Stop!” Alison slumped, breathing hard. “Oh God. I can’t stand up.” She really couldn’t; her legs were too rubbery.

Elise lowered them both to the tiles, where Alison knelt with a sigh of relief, resting her shoulder and head against the wall. It wasn’t even remotely comfortable, but at the moment she was incapable of going anywhere else.

“Are you all right?” Elise sounded a little concerned.

Alison nodded. “I just need to sit for a minute.”

“Okay.” Elise kissed her neck, caressing her arm and leg. “Don’t attack me unless you’re willing to pay the price.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Alison knelt for another half minute or so, then straightened as the strength finally returned to her limbs.

“Getting up?” Elise put her hands on Alison’s sides. “Come on.”

As soon as they stood, Alison turned into her, holding her tightly. “I really didn’t expect that.”

“You should have.”

“I can see that. You’re not one to be messed with, are you?”

“I’d think you would have figured that out a long time ago. You’ve known me for seven years.”

“Seven wasted years, if you ask me.”

Elise froze, then pulled away and looked into her eyes. “I think that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

This kiss had a sweetness to it that Alison wanted to hold forever. But when they separated, Elise said, “Not that I’m running out on you, but I think I’m starting to prune.”

“All right. I still have to shampoo. I’ll see you later?”

Elise nodded, kissed her again, then sidled past her and left the shower. Alison wasn’t very efficient at shampooing, since she was rather distracted by the glimpses of Elise drying off. But when the bathroom door slid open and shut again, she sighed and got back to business.

Elise was already dressed when she arrived in the bedroom, looking very casual in her jeans and sweater and presenting a tempting view as she bent over the overnight bag on the floor. She straightened, a sonic
dehumidifier in her hand, and smiled at the sight of Alison in her towel. “Nice,” she said. “I think you should wear that all day.”

“And freeze my ass off? No thanks.” Alison went to the armoire and began pulling out clothes.

“Can I request the Starfleet underwear?”

Chuckling, Alison said, “No. Those are special occasion only.”

“This isn’t a special occasion?”

She turned, her arms full of clothes, and watched as Elise pulled the dehumidifier through her hair. “This is a very special occasion. But I was thinking more along the lines of a birthday. You can do that without using a mirror?”

Elise looked from the dehumidifier to her. “You can’t?”

“Well, I can, but I’m usually sorry. If I don’t get the part in the right place, bad things happen.”

“Ah. I guess my hair is more forgiving.”

“That’s because your hair is more straight. And soft,” she added a little dreamily. Elise smiled as she resumed her task, and Alison carried her clothes over to the bed. She dropped the towel, reached for the underwear, and looked up to find Elise staring. “Ah ah,” she warned, raising a hand. “Stay where you are. I’m sensitive.”

“What? I’m just watching you.”

“Right. Then keep watching.” Of course, Elise did exactly that, making Alison a little selfconscious as she drew on her underwear and picked up the bra.

“You’re not really putting that on, are you? At home? On a day off?”

“Yes, and you know why? Because I’m a little sore after being repeatedly attacked by a certain bear in this room. I don’t want anything rubbing.”

“Oh. Well, I’d apologize for that, except that it would be a lie.” Elise made one more pass with the dehumidifier, deactivated it and dropped it into her bag. Walking over, she sat on the edge of the bed as Alison reached for her jeans and drew them on. “Can you stop right there? Because you in jeans and a bra is just about the sexiest thing walking. It’s even better than the towel.”

“Sorry.” Alison smiled at the crestfallen look on her face. “But you really are good for a person’s self-esteem.” She pulled the undershirt over her head, tucked it in, and fastened the jeans. “Ahh. Much warmer now.”
The alpaca wool sweater came next, and Elise reached out to feel the fabric.

“I bet I know what this is.”
“I bet you’re right.”
“From your mom’s herd?”
“No, this one’s from a neighbor’s herd. Mom gave her my measurements and asked her to knit it in exchange for stud services. The barter system is alive and well over there.”
“So this sweater was paid for by sperm.”

Alison laughed then, surprised and delighted by this glimpse of a rather earthy sense of humor that Elise normally kept under wraps. “Exactly! You know, I think my mom would like you.”

“Not your dad?” The question was asked lightly, but Alison could see something else in her eyes.

“My dad would love you. You have the sort of logical mind he appreciates. My mom would appreciate your humor.” It occurred to her that there wasn’t really a question of her impressing Elise’s mother. Melanie was not going to be a central part of Elise’s social life for many years, and though the woman had well earned her incarceration, she wasn’t the only one paying the price. “What about your dad?” she asked, trying to redirect their conversation. “Is he in the picture?”

“No really. He and Mom severed their marital contract when I was ten. Turned out he just wanted to be a Hamilton, not a husband or father.”

Another piece of Elise’s personality clicked into place. No wonder she’d played the field so long. “I’m sorry to hear that. He sounds like an ass.”

“Eh.” Elise shrugged. “That was a long time ago. He doesn’t know what he gave up.”

“No, he certainly doesn’t. Did he even try to keep in touch?”

“For a little while. When I was a teenager I lived for his weekends. But then he found another wife—a wealthy one, imagine that—and we kind of got dropped off the plate. Stephen still talks to him now and again. I don’t.”

“So…sorry if I’m being presumptuous here, but…would I be right in thinking that Brian became your father figure?”

Elise gave her a wry smile. “That’s not presumptuous, it’s obvious.
Uncle Brian’s been there for me. My dad wasn’t. Which reminds me…” She groaned. “I really need to talk to him. And Aunt Catarina. God, I’m not looking forward to this.”

“You haven’t talked to him yet? Elise, he was worried sick about you when we were working on the statement, and that was five days ago!”

“He knows where I am. I’ve left him messages keeping him up to date and letting him know I’m okay. Give me a little credit, Alison. My mom might be in prison, but she managed to teach me a few manners before she went.”

“I’m sorry.” Whoa, she’d really overstepped. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Which way did you mean it?” Elise didn’t seem to be angry, but the even stare she was directing at Alison meant a full explanation was due right now.

“I just…” What the hell had she meant? “I don’t know. I just know that if I were him and hadn’t been hearing from you, I’d be pulling my hair out.”

“He doesn’t have that much that he can spare,” said Elise, and the gentle humor relieved Alison far more than it should have. “But I don’t think you need to worry about not hearing from me. After all, I came to you in the first place.”

“Why did you?” asked Alison. “I really have been wondering about that. Not that I’m complaining, because I’m very, very…” She leaned over and kissed a line up Elise’s throat, punctuating each kiss with another word— “…very, very, very, very glad that you did.” By now Elise was chuckling, and Alison smiled as she straightened. “But I am curious,” she finished. “You didn’t know me that well.”

“Maybe I knew you better than you realize. You shared a lot about yourself the night that I brought the pad thai over. Not so much in the details of what you said, but in what they revealed about you. And I knew from the night I broke into your office that you had a caring heart. You took care of me that night even though you were furious with me.”

“I wasn’t furious with you all that night,” protested Alison. “Just for a few minutes.”

Elise raised an eyebrow. “Okay. The point being that you could look past that and still feel compassion. And you understood exactly what was going on. I needed all those things, and I needed your level head. Aunt
Catarina didn’t know about any of this until after Lynne got her FedComm ID, and I’m not sure how much Uncle Brian actually told her. My guess is he never mentioned the part about the three of us being under suspicion for attempted murder. So I think there was probably some drama going on in that house, and the last thing I needed was more drama.”

That made sense. “Well, I’ll just be grateful to my level head, then, if that’s what brought you to me. Do you want to call them now? You can use my office. I’ll head downstairs.”

“I do want to call them—well, no, I don’t want to, but I have to—but I need breakfast first. I’m a little starved.”

“So am I, now that you mention it.” She sat down and pulled on her socks. “How about Spanish omelettes? Handmade?”

“Handmade? You cook?”

“Not very often. But I’m kind of in the mood for it now.” She slipped her feet into her shoes and fastened them. “After all, I have the whole day off and no emergencies. And a very beautiful, and starving, woman in my house.”

“Sounds fantastic.”

Elise was thrilled to discover Alison’s stash of fresh orange juice, happily drinking down two full glasses while Alison replicated the ingredients for their breakfast and began chopping and dicing. They didn’t talk much, but the atmosphere in the kitchen was easy and comfortable, and for all her practicality and real-world sensibility, Alison couldn’t help but imagine a scene like this taking place every weekend morning for a long time to come. As she heated the sliced vegetables and began mixing the eggs, Elise leaned against the counter and watched with a contented expression that looked very good on her.

“I really do need to take care of those marks,” she said eventually.

“Hm? Oh, the bear bites?”

Elise nodded. “Where’s your dermal regenerator?”

“In the master bath. Which, by the way, is what you should use from now on. Look in the top right drawer.”

“Got it.” She pushed off from the counter and vanished, leaving Alison to contemplate the idea of a future when Elise would never have to ask where anything was.

She had combined the ingredients and poured the omelette in the pan.
by the time Elise returned. “Perfect timing,” she said, carrying the mixing bowl and utensils to the replicator for sterilization. “Let me just take care of these. We’ve got about fifteen minutes before I have to turn the omelette. It takes that long for the potatoes to cook through.”

Pulling the now-clean items from the replicator, she put them away and then leaned against the counter, lifting her chin while Elise held the humming regenerator to her throat.

“You know,” said Elise conversationally, “part of me wants to leave these intact. I think there’s more bear inside me than I ever realized. I actually like seeing these on your throat.”

“Possessive much?”

“Never. Not until today, apparently.”

“Well, we’re still on the same page, then. Because before today I’d have been angry with anyone who said what you just did. But there’s a part of me that wouldn’t mind leaving these marks intact.”

Elise turned off the regenerator. “Really?”

God, her eyes were beautiful, especially this close. “Really.”

After a heavy pause, Elise said, “Then I’m leaving this last one. Because every time I look at it I remember exactly how it felt to put it there, and how you moved underneath me when I did.”

Alison closed her eyes. “Jesus Christ. Don’t make me have to take another shower.”

“Is that all it takes?” Elise’s voice was low, and Alison shivered a little.

“With you, apparently so. Could we talk about politics now?”

Elise laughed, and the moment came to a merciful end. But as Alison turned back to check the omelette, she couldn’t help her satisfied smile. So Elise was possessive for the first time in her life? Good to know.

They did end up talking about politics, which of course led to President Gutierrez’ speech and the Council vote on amnesty. Elise wanted to know if Gutierrez and Kathryn had planned his appearance at her speech in Geneva, and was surprised to learn that Kathryn hadn’t known a thing about it. “But—wait a minute,” she said, her brow furrowed. “When we called Lynne that night, you said you’d been there for the negotiations. I thought that meant you went with Kathryn. Which, now that I think about it, doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. Who did you go with?”

Oh shit. Alison hadn’t considered how to explain this to Elise, or even if she should. Lynne had never given her permission to. But damn, she
should have seen this one coming. Of course, she had been a little preoccupied with other things…

“Alison?”

She hesitated a moment longer, then said the only thing she could. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can answer that.”

“What, it’s a state secret who negotiated that amnesty?” Elise’s frown intensified. “Hold on. Why were you even involved unless it had something to do with the Foundation? And I’m not your aunt, there’s nothing you can’t tell me about Foundation interests. Unless…”

Alison watched the realization come over her face and braced herself.

“…Lynne? It was Lynne? It was, wasn’t it? But how? What the hell kind of influence could she possibly…oh, for God’s sake. I can’t believe it.” She sat back in her chair with a thump, looking at Alison with wide eyes. “That’s why she didn’t reverse the mission.”

Alison said nothing, but Elise didn’t need her to. She was putting it all together.

“So that whole speech about wanting to make informed choices and asking for input on other funding directions from the board…that was all bullshit. She was just playing for time so that she could use the Foundation as a negotiating tool—the biggest possible prize she could dangle in front of Gutierrez. Who clearly jumped like a kangaroo to her bidding.” She was still staring at Alison, who was frozen in place, waiting to see how bad the fallout would be. To her surprise, Elise shook her head and chuckled. “Well, fuck me. Who would ever have guessed our innocent little cousin from the past would play such hardball? And you told me that she needed protection? From what? God, you need to hang a warning sign on that woman.” She paused, looking more closely at Alison, and chuckled again. “You look like you could use a drink already. Don’t worry, I’m not going to tell anyone else on the board. I’ll let Lynne do that.”

“Jesus.” Alison didn’t know how tense she’d been until her body suddenly deflated. “I thought you’d be upset.”

“Well, I think it was a pretty heavy-handed maneuver, especially for someone who didn’t know what she was messing with. But no, I’m not upset. Impressed, maybe, but not upset.”

“She knew exactly what she was messing with, Elise. Don’t underestimate her. Take that as advice from someone who did and learned her lesson.”
“Are you going to tell me the story?”
“About learning my lesson?”
“No, about meeting with Gutierrez. Because I’d have given my left tit to be there for that. Gutierrez being taken down by some tender newbie that he figured was an easy mark? I bet he thought he’d have her for dinner and dessert. Though, come to think of it, I want the story about learning your lesson, too.”
“Oh, look at that. Time to turn the omelette.” Alison got up to the musical sound of Elise’s laughter.
“That won’t work! I’m just going to sit here and wait.”
Alison flipped the omelette and turned around, enjoying the sight of Elise smiling up at her. “You’re going to wait a long time.”
“That’s all right. I have nowhere I have to be.” Elise crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the chair, the very picture of relaxed anticipation.
“Yes, you do,” said Alison. “Right here.”
She certainly could have waited a few days to do this, Kathryn thought wryly. Her leave was starting Saturday, and she’d have more time than she knew what to do with then. Instead, she was wrapping up a packed day of work, in which she’d been to the other side of the globe and back again, with one more self-imposed diplomatic duty: she was going to Phoebe’s gallery.

Phoebe had been thrilled when she’d suggested it the night before, after she and Lynne had returned from their night hike in Colorado. Kathryn hadn’t actually had a specific date in mind, but Phoebe’s instant enthusiasm had resulted in an appointment for this evening, on her way back home from San Francisco. She was still in her dress uniform, tired from the ungodly hour at which she’d had to start the day, and not really enthusiastic about having one more obligation. But she’d gotten herself into it, and she’d see it through.

It had seemed like a better idea the night before. Lynne’s surprise had put her into a glowing mood, and during the precious hours that she and Lynne had sat upon that rock, mapping out their future, she’d felt a sudden expansive love for her whole family. Perhaps it was the knowledge that, for the first time since her cadet days, she was going to have an actual home. Not a residence, not a place to stay between assignments, and not ship’s quarters. A real home, a place for dreams and laughter and life,
a place where she could invite her friends and family to visit. She’d never been much of a hostess while living in her San Francisco apartment. Most of her friends were Starfleet, and visits tended to occur either onboard various ships, at Starfleet Headquarters, or at some restaurant in the city. Even her first five years on *Voyager* hadn’t made her any more social. If anything, she grew less so, as her quarters became the only place where she could relax and let down her guard.

Lynne had changed that. By the end of their journey, Kathryn had found herself frequently co-hosting dinners and even a few parties, always with Lynne at her side and always with a genuine enjoyment of their company. She missed that now. The Janeway farm might be full of company, but it wasn’t her home and she wasn’t the hostess. While sitting on the rock with Lynne, she’d imagined the dinners and parties they’d have in their house of dreams, and in her imaginings, Gretchen and Phoebe had been prominent.

On the ride back to the Denver transport station, she’d thought about her rift with Phoebe, which still affected their interactions almost three weeks later. Neither of them had ever addressed it. She still hadn’t wanted to address it, but thought that perhaps it was time to reach out. So she’d made the offer.

“That’ll teach me,” she muttered to herself as she turned the last corner. At least Phoebe’s gallery was within walking distance of the transport station; the solitary exercise and fresh air was a welcome change after the day she’d had. A few more steps brought her to a large display window, housing two paintings that she’d have recognized as Phoebe’s from thirty paces away. Her sister’s exuberant style of painting certainly matched her personality.

She pushed on the old-fashioned door and stopped in puzzlement when it didn’t open. Had Phoebe forgotten? But the lights were on. Lifting a gloved hand, she pounded on the door and waited. Footsteps clicked across hardwood flooring and in a moment the door was yanked open.

“Come in, please!” said Phoebe happily. “Sorry about the locked door, I didn’t want anyone else wandering in.”

“You’re closed?” Kathryn stepped into welcome heat, stripping off her gloves and coat as Phoebe shut the door behind her.

“Of course I’m closed. You think I want to deal with customers or
window shoppers when my sister is finally here? I’ve been looking forward to this since you landed.” Phoebe took her coat and hung it up on a wall peg. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Something hot would be great. Especially if it has caffeine in it.”

“I have some nice black teas…” Phoebe smiled. “Don’t worry, I have coffee too. Here, take a look around the front gallery while I get it.” Without waiting for an answer, she strode through a doorway on the right, leaving Kathryn alone with a roomful of art.

The first wall of paintings was vintage Phoebe, with the broad brush strokes and vibrant colors she associated with her sister’s style. But the next wall was different. It held a single painting, and if Kathryn hadn’t seen the artist’s signature in the bottom corner, she would never have taken it for a Phoebe Janeway.

It was a night scene, showing a broad prairie under the merciless silver light of a full moon. Trees lined the banks of a creek in the distance, their winter branches stabbing the sky like claws. The dead grass in the foreground looked brittle and sharp. The brush strokes were so delicate as to be nearly invisible, and the whole painting seemed…cold, and somehow a little frightening.

The clicking footsteps preceded Phoebe’s return, a fragrant cup of coffee in her hand. She offered the cup and saucer to Kathryn, who let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you, this is just what I needed.”

“You always need coffee. Lynne says that even the Borg Collective knows that about you.”

“Yes, that was a little startling to hear. I’m not sure how I feel about the Collective knowing my tastes.” Wanting to get off that topic, she indicated the dark painting. “This is a departure from your style.”

“It was a departure, seven years ago. I hadn’t looked at it in a long time, but about a year ago I dusted it off and decided I could display it again.”

“What happened seven years—” Kathryn stopped, then looked at the painting again. Cold, empty, and frightening. She looked back at Phoebe, who nodded.

“I painted that when Voyager was lost. Mother was out of her mind with worry, and I spent every evening at her house, trying to be there for her. I know, you think I always spend every evening there, but that’s only been since you came home.” She turned toward the painting, scanning it
with a critical eye. “I couldn’t let her see that I was panicked, too. If I had, she’d have worried about me on top of you, and she didn’t need that. So I painted instead. I never showed this one to Mother. Not until I put it on display last year. It’s been on and off the walls since then; I just hung it up again a few weeks ago.”

Last year…

“You dusted it off when MIDAS reached us,” Kathryn realized.

“What a day that was! Not only did we know you were still alive, and so much closer, but we could actually send messages back and forth. That was when Mother came back to life. And my style changed again.”

“Was this your style for seven years?”

“No.” She flashed a smile. “You know me, can’t stick with anything for too long. Besides, my dark phase doesn’t sell as well.” She moved to the third wall, which held a series of five urban scenes, and began to describe what had inspired them. Kathryn listened with half an ear, focusing most of her attention on her sister’s face. It occurred to her that she hadn’t looked at Phoebe—really looked at her—since she’d gotten home. At first there had been too much going on, but after Phoebe had made her so angry three weeks ago, she had minimized their eye contact. Now that she was paying attention, she could recognize the same things in Phoebe’s face that she had seen in their mother’s: a type of aging that could not be accounted for with just seven years of time.

Phoebe moved them into the next room, featuring agricultural scenes, and Kathryn recognized many of the activities from her own childhood. These paintings were light and airy, seemingly all taking place under brilliant spring or summer sunshine, except for one that accurately depicted an Indiana summer thunderstorm. But even the storm didn’t evoke the dread and fear that the dark painting in the previous room had. Still, the style continued to be more delicate and refined, with barely discernible brush strokes. Phoebe’s exuberance appeared to be a thing of the past. Kathryn’s own tastes ran more toward this style, but knowing the cause of its emergence left her unable to fully appreciate it.

They crossed into another room, and once again Kathryn was startled by the shift—not just in style, but also subject.

“You never painted spacescapes before,” she said, admiring the brilliance of a planetary nebula.

“This was what I graduated to after my dark phase. You made contact
through that alien array, and we knew you were still alive after four years. We couldn’t reach you, and we had no way of knowing how long you’d stay alive, but at least we knew you were still out there, and most importantly, we knew where you were. So I started thinking about you a little differently. Instead of being so afraid for you, I thought about what you might be seeing…things nobody in the entire Federation had ever seen before. I could let my imagination run wild.”

“And you did,” Kathryn observed. Some of these paintings pushed the edge of theoretical possibility, but then, Phoebe wasn’t a scientist. And they really were beautiful. She moved along the walls slowly, admiring each in turn and listening to Phoebe’s descriptions. Pausing before a painting that envisioned a dual sunset from an alien beach, she said, “This could have been painted on Bliss.”

“Your wedding planet? Really?”

“Yes, really. It orbited a binary star system, and our beach had white sand, just like this. Lynne and I stood at the edge of the water and watched the suns set just before beaming back to Voyager. Leaving that beach was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done. It was like leaving paradise.” She stepped back to view the painting as if it were hanging on the wall opposite a couch. “Lynne would love this one. We might have to buy it from you.”

“Oh, no,” said Phoebe. “This isn’t the one you want.”

“And how exactly do you know that?”

“Because I know which one you do want, and it’s not this.”

God, she could be irritating!

“I see,” said Kathryn. “Then which of these do you think I want?”

“None of them. You haven’t seen the one you want yet. Come on.” Without waiting for a response, she led the way into another room. Kathryn followed, grumbling to herself, but when she came through the doorway she stopped in her tracks, her jaw dropping.

The room was small, holding only one painting. But that painting was more than two meters across, and would have dominated even a much larger space. It was a spacescape, with a glorious depiction of a gas pillar star nursery. By itself, the gas pillars would have been arresting enough, but what had stunned Kathryn into immobility was the main subject.

Voyager swept across the painting with all the glory of a conquering hero. She gleamed as white as the day she’d left the shipyard, her hull free
of any Borg enhancements. Some viewports were lit, others dark, and Kathryn saw at a glance that the dark ones were crew quarters. This wasn’t a product of Phoebe’s imagination. She’d have had to study Voyager’s schematics to make it this realistic, and to know that the working parts of the ship—the labs, the public spaces, the offices—were always lit. Voyager did not sleep, not with three crew shifts circulating through her. But her crew did, and Phoebe had depicted that perfectly.

Kathryn moved closer, her awe growing with every step. Like the previous paintings in Phoebe’s newer style, the brush strokes were almost invisible. Every edge was crisp, and somehow she had made the hull seem reflective. The nacelles were in their warp position, and to Kathryn’s eye, the ship had been caught in the moment before it jumped to warp. It radiated a barely restrained power.

Moving to the left edge of the painting, she began a slow transit, marveling at the incredible detail. Phoebe had overlooked nothing. It was all here, from bow to stern, right down to the ports for docking clamps. When she arrived at the other edge, she stepped back again and admired the whole scene, but her vision soon blurred with tears.

“Phoebe, this is beautiful,” she whispered. “Absolutely beautiful. I’m...I’m speechless.”

“Well, that’s a first.” Phoebe came up beside her. “I have to admit, I’m rather proud of this one.”

“Proud, hell! This should be hanging in the lobby of Starfleet Headquarters. I’m serious, this is the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen.” She stepped forward again and pointed. “These viewports are my quarters.”

“I know,” said Phoebe.

Kathryn laughed. “Of course you know. You’d have to, to paint something this perfect. Did you memorize Voyager’s schematics?”

“Well, not all of them. I didn’t pay attention to Jeffries tubes and all the internal parts. But I paid very careful attention to the exterior spaces, and to any place that you might have spent time in.” She flashed a delighted smile. “I’m really glad you like it so much.”

“I don’t like it. I love it. You were right, this is the one I want to buy.”

“Ah, but before you make a decision like that, you should see the whole thing.”

Kathryn looked up in confusion. “What do you mean? What am I missing?”
“The even tinier details.” Phoebe went to the painting and pressed a hidden button in the bottom left corner of the frame. A small magnifier fell into her hand, and she held it out. “Here, take a closer look at your quarters.”

Baffled, Kathryn took the magnifier and leaned forward until her nose was nearly touching the painting. The viewports came into focus, and she gasped. “Oh my god, Phoebe! How did you do this?”

“A new technique called microfilament painting,” said Phoebe, sounding pleased. “It takes some time, but I love the way you can hide entire secondary paintings inside the first.”

Indeed she had. Through the viewports, Kathryn could see her quarters—all of them. Every detail, right down to Seven’s vector art on the wall opposite the couch. The table was set for dinner, and Lynne sat at one end of it, facing the viewport. Perpendicular to her was Kathryn herself. They were both dressed in casual clothes, dining at the end of a day, and Lynne’s fork was raised as she made a point. Her expression was amused, and Kathryn could almost hear her voice. Her own figure in the painting was turned toward Lynne, so that very little of her face was visible—but there was just enough to see that her lips were curved in a smile as she lifted her wine-glass. It was a perfect representation of countless dinners in those quarters, and Kathryn’s heart clenched at the exquisite familiarity of it.

Slowly, she straightened, unwilling to let the scene go but knowing that Phoebe was waiting for a response. When their eyes met, hers were misty once again. “It’s us. I mean, really us. It’s like you were there.”

Phoebe beamed. “In a way, I was. I saw a lot of messages from you two over that last year, and I paid attention to the background. Plus, I asked Lynne to send holophotos of your quarters. That made it easy to put together the rooms themselves. Well, relatively easy. Nothing about microfilament painting is actually easy.”

“I can’t even imagine. But what really amazes me is how you could capture us so perfectly. Do you know how many times we sat there, in those exact positions, and had conversations that looked just like that?”

“No, but I imagined it,” said Phoebe. “And I’ve seen those expressions on your faces in so many messages, the ones where you were recording together. So often Lynne would say something to make us laugh, and
you’d get just that look on your face. It fascinated me, because I’d never seen you look at anyone that way before.”

The mistiness in Kathryn’s eyes was growing, and she wrapped her surprised sister in a hug. “There is love in this painting,” she said hoarsely, and Phoebe nodded, her own grip tightening around Kathryn’s back.

“Yes, there is. A lot of it. Days and weeks and months of it. Kathryn…” Phoebe’s breath hitched. “I’m sorry about what I said in Mother’s kitchen. About you and choices. I never meant it the way it sounded. I was just teasing you.”

“I know. You just hit me in a raw spot, and on a bad morning. I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“I don’t like to think of you making those choices.” Phoebe let go and stepped back, her eyes suspiciously shiny. “First we worried about you being dead, then we worried about you ever finding a way back. But I never worried about your happiness. I never got that far. And then when you made contact with MIDAS, you already had Lynne and you seemed so happy—well, until that whole disaster with the Borg. Thank god that turned out all right. But it made it so much easier for me to think of you out there, knowing that you weren’t just alive, that you were living.”

“Actually I wasn’t living. Not until Lynne.”

“I know. I mean, I know that now. Lynne gave me a little education after she heard what happened.”

“She did?” asked Kathryn in surprise. “She didn’t tell me that.”

“Yeah, and before that, it was Mother and Revi, right after you left the kitchen. I felt so stupid about it, and I wanted to apologize, but you would hardly even look at me and I didn’t know how to bring it up.”

Kathryn felt a twinge of guilt. She hadn’t realized that her avoidance of Phoebe would be so noticeable.

“And then I saw your interview after the New York parade, and you listed off twenty-three names, and I felt awful, Kathryn. I was just slingit shit and you were talking about people dying. I’m really, really sorry.”

“It’s okay, Phoebe. You’ve already apologized. Don’t worry about it anymore.”

“So does that mean you’ll stop avoiding me?”

Kathryn summoned up a smile. “Yes, on one condition. You sell me this painting.” She watched in surprise as Phoebe’s face fell.
"I can’t. See?” Phoebe pointed to the placard on the wall, which Kathryn hadn’t even noticed in her fixation on the painting. Stepping closer, she read the name of the piece and had to swallow hard. It was titled “Coming Home,” and she couldn’t imagine a better one. But below the name was a three-word statement in all capital letters: NOT FOR SALE.

“You already sold it?” she asked, her heart dropping. It was inconceivable that anyone else should have this painting.

“No, silly, then it would say ‘sold.’ I would never sell this. Not to anyone. It’s too personal.”

“Not even to me? Come on, Phoebe! You have to!”

“How can I sell it to you when it’s already yours?”

“It—” Kathryn stopped as her brain caught up with her. “You did this for me?”

Phoebe nodded, and this time the mistiness that shrouded Kathryn’s eyes overflowed. She pulled Phoebe back into her arms, holding on as tightly as she could. “Thank you,” she managed. “This is the best homecoming gift ever.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Phoebe’s voice sounded teary as well. “But for me, the best homecoming gift is right here.” She squeezed harder, emphasizing her point, and Kathryn decided that they were going to stand just like this for a while. It would take that long to get the water out of her eyes.
Kathryn tugged her dress uniform jacket down, straightened the sleeves, and regarded her reflection in the mirror critically. This was the last time she’d be wearing this uniform for several months, and while she was mostly gleeful about it, there was a part of her that felt oddly sad.

The last three days had been even more packed than the previous week and a half, something she wouldn’t have thought possible. But Necheyev was apparently determined to get as much out of her as she could, even keeping her after hours for additional one-on-one debriefings. On top of that, the speeches and interviews in Beijing, New Delhi and Sydney had completely destroyed her internal clock; she’d had to leave the house at two or three every morning and transport to the other side of the globe into full daylight. By the time she had returned home last night, she’d been utterly exhausted.

On the other hand, Lynne had accompanied her to two of those speeches, making a compromise between her need to be on a mountain somewhere and Kathryn’s need for her wife. It had made the travel and the stress so much more bearable. There were times when it actually felt like they were on Voyager again, going planetside together. Kathryn supposed she shouldn’t feel nostalgic for those years, but the truth was that since Lynne had come aboard, there had been many times when she’d
enjoyed true happiness despite being lost. She had rarely felt like that in
the month they’d been home.

But this morning had been perfect. She’d slept for ten hours and
opened her eyes to find Lynne still in bed with her, an intentional gift
from her wife who never needed more than four hours of sleep. Lynne had
been reading, quietly waiting for her, and Kathryn had discovered that a
good night’s sleep plus the sight of Lynne was all that was needed to eradi-
cate two weeks worth of stress. They had made love, with Lynne showing
her most tender side, taking such sweet care of her that Kathryn had
nearly cried from the sheer comfort of it. She had needed it so badly, and
as always, Lynne knew.

There was no better way to start a six-month leave.

She’d also had a wonderful heart-to-heart with Revi today, who
continued to amaze her with her quiet strength. Of all things, Revi had
invited her mother to the party. She’d said Dhara needed to “get the hell
out of the house,” but her casual reference couldn’t hide her concern. Revi
had a very divided heart when it came to her mother, but they were both
reaching out for each other despite their pain—or perhaps because of it.

Every single one of the Maquis were attending the party. Since they’d
been living under travel restrictions, none of them had gone very far away,
so it hadn’t been difficult for them to return for this final celebration.
Sending out her message to them had been one of the highlights of her
entire career. It wasn’t often that one was able to say, “Congratulations,
you’re free,” to more than two dozen people.

A large number of her Starfleet crew were coming as well. Though
many were already scattered to the far reaches of the Federation, most of
those who were not prevented by scheduling conflicts had returned,
anxious to celebrate this final victory. And perhaps, like her, anxious to
see familiar faces again. A few declined for no stated reason, but she
hadn’t expected everyone to have the same fond memories she did. In
fact, she was surprised by the attendance numbers. It was going to be a
big party, and she was glad Neelix had taken charge of the preparations.
Just as Revi had predicted, Neelix thought he’d died and gone to the Great
Forest. Kathryn must have fielded nine calls from him in the preceding
days as he stressed over food and decorating choices, but she understood
that for him, this kind of stress was the very foundation of joy.

And for her, the foundation of joy was the woman coming through
their bedroom door right now, resplendent in the white dress uniform she’d last seen a month ago at their Starfleet reception.

“Hi, sweetheart,” she said warmly. “You look absolutely gorgeous.”

“Thank you. You, on the other hand, look commanding and intimidating with all those medals.” Lynne stepped up to her and slid her arms around her waist. “And very, very beautiful, all at the same time.”

Kathryn leaned in for a kiss. “My offer to get you a few medals still stands. I think I’d have no problem pushing through the recommendations.”

“Nah. They’re just a pain to put on. I’ve seen you messing around with yours.” Lynne gave her an easy smile. “How about you be the medal wearer in our family, and I’ll be the one to take them off of you.”

“That’s a deal,” Kathryn whispered, drawing her head down. For once Lynne’s hair was loose, and she happily buried her fingers in it, holding her head close as she put all her passion into their kiss. By the time they separated, Lynne was breathing more rapidly and looking at her with brilliant green eyes.

“You really need to think about whether you want that perfect uniform to stay that way,” she said in a low voice. “Because if you do, then you’d better stop this. I won’t be held responsible for wrinkles or missing medals.”

“So this morning wasn’t enough for you?”

“Oh love, we have a lot of catching up to do. This morning was just the tip of the iceberg.”

“Kathryn, do you think—oh, sorry.” Gretchen was standing in their doorway, looking slightly embarrassed. “You know, this door can be shut when necessary.”

“It wasn’t necessary,” said Lynne, keeping one arm around Kathryn’s waist as she turned. “We were just talking.”

“Right. I know that kind of talking. For me it usually resulted in getting pregnant.”

Lynne laughed, while Gretchen raised an eyebrow at Kathryn. “More than you wanted to know, Goldenbird?”

Apparently she hadn’t kept the discomfort off her face. “No, I’m fine,” she said. “I’m perfectly aware that you and Dad had sex twice.”

That set both Lynne and Gretchen laughing, but a moment later Lynne stopped and said, “Goldenbird?”
Kathryn groaned. “Mom!”
Lynne looked over at Gretchen. “Goldenbird? Where’d that come from?”
“It was her childhood nickname. Her father gave it to her, because she had such blonde hair then, and was always flitting about after him.”
Kathryn cringed under Lynne’s smiling look. “That is so cute,” said Lynne. “Can I call you that?”
“No, you may not. And thanks a lot, Mom.”
“I can’t believe you never told her.” Gretchen was unapologetic.
“Yeah, I can’t either. Why didn’t you?”
“Because it never came up! I don’t recall you telling me that your dad called you ‘squirt’. I had to hear that from your parents.”
“He called you squirt?” asked Gretchen. “What kind of a name is that?”
Knowing fingers pinched her in a very ticklish spot. “Hey! Stop it!” Kathryn shoved Lynne away, laughing. “Don’t you wrinkle my uniform.”
“You only wish I’d wrinkle it now.” Lynne put on a haughty expression, but it couldn’t last. Turning back to Gretchen, she said, “He started calling me that when I was little. In my time it was an affectionate term for kids. And when I got to be taller than Mom and only two centimeters shorter than him, he still loved to use it.”
“You were always his little girl, no matter how tall you grew,” said Gretchen with a sage nod.
“I was.” Lynne’s smile held a familiar sadness, and Kathryn couldn’t bear it.
“You still are,” she said, wrapping her arms around her once more.
“You’re not going to kiss again, are you?” Gretchen hid her eyes.
“Okay, go ahead.”
They smiled at each other, then shrugged and came together for a kiss if only to justify Gretchen’s precaution.
“Are you done?”
“It’s safe, Mom.”
Gretchen looked up, her eyes dancing. “Thank god. So, I came in to ask if you thought I should wear my blue scarf or the red patterned one with this dress.” She held up the scarves in question.
“Red,” said Lynne.
“Blue,” said Kathryn at the same time.
Gretchen rolled her eyes. “I should have known.”

“Let’s ask Barney,” said Lynne, letting go of Kathryn and walking over to the little box in the corner of the room. “Hey, buddy.” She leaned down and reached into the box. “Barney?”

Alerted by the abrupt change in her tone, Kathryn started across the room. Lynne looked back, her expression one of total panic. “There’s something wrong with him!”

By now Gretchen had joined them, and they all bent over the box to see Barney backed into a corner, shivering and looking very sick. “We have to take him to the vet,” Lynne said, her voice shaking. “Now.”

“All right,” said Kathryn, sliding into command mode. “I’ll take you there. Mom, please go to Voyager ahead of us and let everyone know we’ll be a little late. We’ll join the party as soon as we know Barney’s all right.”

“No,” said Gretchen decisively. “I’ll take Lynne to the vet. You go to Voyager.”

That did make more sense, though Kathryn was extremely reluctant to leave Lynne at a time like this.

Lynne stood up, holding the box in her arms. “Kathryn, go. It’s more your party than anyone else’s. Gretchen?”

“Come on,” said Gretchen, striding out of the room. Lynne followed without even saying goodbye, a clear sign of her distress.

“Well, shit,” Kathryn said to herself, hurrying after them. That damned kitten had better be all right. She could not even imagine Lynne’s devastation if anything happened to him.

Gretchen and Lynne were out the door in less than two minutes. Kathryn didn’t think Lynne would have even put on a coat if she hadn’t been there, holding it out with one hand while reaching for Barney’s box with the other. When the door shut behind them, the house felt far too quiet and lonely. Molly came padding out into the hallway, curious about the bustle, and Kathryn hugged her with a sense of melancholy. What a day for this to happen.

She shrugged her own coat on, said goodbye to Molly, and headed down the path to the guest house. Revi and Seven were already waiting, and even in her worry Kathryn couldn’t help but notice how good they looked in their dress uniforms.

“Where’s Lynne?” asked Seven, shutting the door behind them.

“She and Gretchen had to go to the vet. Barney’s sick.”
“Barney’s sick!” Revi stopped on the steps. “What’s wrong with him?”
“I don’t know. He was shivering and nonresponsive when we looked in
on him.”
“That could be anything. Were his eyes dilated? Was he breathing
more quickly than normal?”
“I don’t know, Revi, I’m not a vet!” Kathryn held up a hand. “Sorry.
I’m just really worried. Lynne is so attached to that kitten that I fear for
her if anything happens. You should have seen the look on her face.”
“It could be any number of things,” said Revi in her soothing doctor’s
voice. “A viral infection, bacterial—all young animals are prone to those
kind of things because they’re still building up their immune systems.
And Barney had a rough start. He might just need a quick hypospray and a
day of being spoiled and he’ll be just fine.”
“God, I hope so.”
They piled into the larger hovercraft and lifted o
ff, with Kathryn
achingly aware of Lynne’s absence. In her pleasant imaginings of this trip
to Voyager, she’d never considered the possibility of Lynne not being there.
And since Revi and Seven were picking up Dhara before coming to the
ship, she would be making her final transport alone.
But when she materialized in the cargo bay of Voyager, she couldn’t
help but feel her spirits rise. The place was already packed with people, all
of whom roared with happiness upon seeing her, and in seconds she was
deluged with Maquis wanting to thank her, Starfleet crew wanting to talk
to her, and Neelix offering her food and trying to explain what each of the
appetizers were. Of course everyone wanted to know where Lynne was,
and sympathized when they heard, but the overall mood was simply too
celebratory for anything to dampen anyone’s spirits for long. People were
already dancing to the smooth jazz tunes being played by a trio in the far
corner. For a moment Kathryn expected to see Harry Kim playing with
them, but this trio had been hired from outside. None of her crew were
doing anything but relaxing tonight.
Neelix had done himself proud with the decorations, festooning the
shuttle bay with banners and blinking lights, and even hanging a wall of
colored tapestries in front of the shuttles, disguising their presence and
making the bay feel more like a reception hall. Kathryn complimented him
on both the décor and the food—which really was quite good—and smiled
as he nearly levitated with happiness. Excitedly, he told her that he was
now taking a culinary class and learning all about the tastes and preferences of different Federation species. He hadn’t yet decided whether to sign up for a stint as bartender on one of the Sovereign class ships, or stay planetbound and open his own restaurant. Kathryn assured him that she was certain he’d be successful, whichever path he chose.

Chakotay shouldered his way through the crowd, tugging Phoebe behind him by the hand. Kathryn took one look at that and promptly picked up a drink from the table.

“Kathryn!” he cried, a delighted smile on his face. “It’s so good to see you again.”

“Hello, Chakotay,” she said, submitting to the hug. The kiss on her cheek surprised her, though. “You look tanned and happy. And I see you found a date.”

“More like she found me.” He looked at Phoebe fondly, and Kathryn wondered if Neelix had something a little stronger hidden away somewhere.

“I decided not to wait for an invitation,” said Phoebe. “So I invited him instead.”

“I was going to ask,” Chakotay protested.

“Not quickly enough. You’d better move faster than that, Commander.” Phoebe gave him a smile unlike anything Kathryn had ever seen from her.

“I can move very fast when I need to.”

Now Kathryn was wondering why he’d even come over, when he seemed to prefer talking to Phoebe. Fortunately, Revi, Seven and Dhara transported in, giving her the perfect reason to excuse herself and make her way over to the beam-in point. “Dhara, welcome to Voyager,” she said. “I’m so glad you could come.”

Dhara looked immaculately groomed and extremely nervous. “Thank you,” she said. “I really wanted to meet some of Revi’s friends. And see where she spent the last part of her journey.”

“Not in the shuttlebay, Mother.” Revi put a hand in the small of her mother’s back and gently guided her to the refreshment table as the others followed. “But maybe I can arrange for a special tour later, if I can get permission from the captain?”

“By all means,” said Kathryn. “Just stay out of Astrometrics, Engineering and Cargo Bay Two.”
“You mean I can’t show her my old bedroom?”
“Where was your bedroom?” asked Dhara, an appetizer halfway to her mouth.
“Our alcoves were in Cargo Bay Two.”
“You slept in a cargo bay?” Dhara was horrified.
“No, we *regenerated* in the cargo bay. We slept in our own quarters. Actually I had some of the nicest quarters on the entire ship, thanks to Kathryn making me CMO. The only quarters bigger than mine were hers and Lynne’s.”
“And she deserved it,” said Kathryn. “She was the best CMO I’ve ever had.”
Revi ducked her head, while Dhara beamed with pride. “I’m not surprised,” Dhara said firmly. “Whatever Revi does, she does to the best of her ability.”
“That’s very true,” Seven agreed, also beaming at her partner. To Kathryn’s surprise, a flush pinked Revi’s cheeks, and she had a feeling Seven wasn’t talking about quite the same thing Dhara was.
“Speaking of doctors, I think I see my former colleague.” Revi indicated the beam-in point with her glass, and Kathryn turned to see the Doctor already delightedly talking with the nearest crewmembers, while Lieutenant Barclay stood nearby, a happy smile on his face.
“I’m so glad Barclay could come,” said Kathryn. “We owe that man a big debt.”
“Do we ever,” Revi agreed. “And Tom and B’Elanna, too—they’re the ones who found the mousetrap. Are they here yet?”
“I haven’t seen them,” Kathryn began, but just then she realized that she *did* see them, on the other side of the cargo bay, talking to a full Klingon woman who could only be B’Elanna’s mother. “Oh, my god, look at that. Miral is here!”
“That’s B’Elanna, our chief engineer,” Revi explained to Dhara. “And Tom is her husband, also our pilot. B’Elanna thought her mother was dead, and only found out when we had our first contact with the Federation that she was alive after all. This is the first time she’s seen her in more than twelve years.” Revi hesitated, then finished, “They didn’t get along well before *Voyager* was lost. B’Elanna hadn’t spoken with her mother for five years before that. I imagine this is quite a reunion.”
Dhara watched them keenly. “So they’re even worse than us.”
“Counselor Troi would tell you to be careful of your phrasing,” said Seven. “They are not ‘worse’ than you. But they do seem to be forging a new relationship...just like you.”

Kathryn looked at Seven in surprise. “You’re learning a lot in your sessions.”

“I listen,” said Seven archly. “And assimilate.”

Kathryn shook her head with a smile. “Where did you assimilate that sense of humor, I wonder?”

“From you, Kathryn.” Seven raised an eyebrow. “Where else?”

Despite her concern for Lynne and Barney, Kathryn had a wonderful time as she circulated through the party. There was so much joy in the air; everywhere she looked she saw smiles and laughter, people clapping each other on the shoulders and backs, wine glasses being clinked together. It was a true delight to be here, and even if she hadn’t known a single person in the room, she’d have been happy just from absorbing the general mood. Even Tuvok seemed to be enjoying himself, as much as a Vulcan could enjoy anything.

More people were beaming in every minute, and she envisioned a queue at the Starfleet Headquarters transport hub. The shuttlebay was rapidly becoming a sea of Starfleet uniforms, which made the arrival of Alison Necheyev and Elise Hamilton all the more striking. Elise wore a richly patterned dress jacket over a pair of dark pants and boots, and if there was a shirt beneath that jacket, it didn’t show in the diving neckline. Alison was a little less daring in white pants and a camel-colored blazer, but her neckline was also designed to draw the eye. Kathryn headed over, and as she drew closer she noticed that the scarf around Alison’s neck was the same pattern and color as Elise’s jacket—a clear visual statement that they had not merely arrived together.

“Welcome to the biggest social event in San Francisco!” she said.

“You aren’t kidding,” said Alison, looking around with a smile. “Wow. This place is already hopping.”

Elise was also observing the room, but her face was more serious. “Incredible. Look at them.”

Alison took her hand, a quiet gesture that told Kathryn a great deal about their relationship. “I had to drag her here,” she confided. “She’s still a little nervous about how she’ll be received.”

“Elise, unless you tell everyone you meet that Melanie Hamilton is
your mother, they won’t even know who you are,” said Kathryn. “And even if they did know, the people in this room learned a long time ago not to judge others except by their own actions. Yours have not been anything to be ashamed of.”

Elise shot her a look that Kathryn could easily interpret; she’d seen it enough times on Revi’s face. “Thank you. I’ll try to keep your advice in mind. Where’s Lynne?”

“At the vet. We’ve had an emergency with Barney.”

“Oh no!” Alison clearly understood the import. “Is he all right?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t heard from her yet, which is worrying me. But it’s only been forty-five minutes, so I’m trying not to get ahead of things.”

“God, nothing had better happen to that kitten,” said Alison. “Lynne would be destroyed.”

“That’s pretty much the literal truth,” Kathryn agreed. “But let’s not go there just now. I need to take you to B’Elanna, by the way. I haven’t made it over there myself yet, but she called earlier this week and made me promise I’d get you together. She was a little upset with me for not telling her you were the one who had Barclay’s team screening all the Foundation reports. Seems she feels she has some ground to make up now.”

“She does?” Alison frowned in confusion. “No, she doesn’t. She was perfectly friendly and very fair the night we found that transmitter in my office.”

“Well, she seems to think she could have done better. Shall we go over and give her a chance?”

“Sure. But we’ll need to swing by the refreshment table first. It looks to me like it’s groaning under the weight of all that food. If we don’t help, there might be a collapse.”

Kathryn chuckled, stepping back and sweeping an arm in the direction of the table. “You have an engineer’s eye.”

“I have a physicist’s eye. Even better.” Alison winked and led the way to the table, still holding Elise’s hand. Kathryn swung in behind them, but stopped halfway there when her commbadge chirped. She tapped it.

“Janeway.”

“Kathryn?” It was Gretchen. “I can barely hear you.”

“Hold on, Mom. Let me get to a quieter spot.” She reached out for Elise’s sleeve and said, “I have to take a call. See you in a few minutes?”
“Of course,” said Elise. “Would you like us to load a plate for you?”

“No, thank you.” Kathryn hurried through the crowd to the shuttlebay doors, finding the silence in the corridor nearly deafening. “Whew. Okay, Mom. What’s happening?”

“First of all, Barney is fine.”

“Oh, thank god.” She leaned against the bulkhead in relief. “What was wrong with him?”

“He picked up a virus somewhere. I hardly know how it’s possible, given his lifestyle, but Dr. Landross says it’s not unusual. He also gave me the name of the virus, but don’t expect me to repeat it.”

“That’s fine, I don’t need to know. I just need to know that he’s okay.”

“He is. He’s had a shot, and some extra vitamins. Dr. Landross says he’ll be a bit shaky for a few more hours, and then he should be bouncing off the walls again.”

“Great. So are you on your way over?”

“Well, that’s the problem. Lynne doesn’t want to come.”

“What?”

“She feels very strongly that she should stay with Barney until he gets past the hard part. I offered to catsit, but she’s having none of it. Dr. Landross even offered to keep him—he said we could pick him up on our way back home. But Lynne doesn’t like the idea of Barney here at the vet all by himself when he’s sick and miserable.”

Kathryn groaned. “Mom, there’s an entire shuttlebay of people here waiting to see her. The Maquis crew all know she’s the one who negotiated that amnesty. She can’t stay home!”

“I understand that, and you understand that, but Lynne is in full kitten mother mode. My arguments are exhausted, so I think it’s time for you to try.”

“All right. I’ll call her. Thanks, Mom.”

“Make it good, Kathryn. That woman is even more stubborn than you, which until now I did not think was possible.”

The moment they signed off, Kathryn tapped her badge again. Since this wasn’t an intraship call, she gave Lynne’s FedComm ID and was soon rewarded with her wife’s voice.

“Hamilton.”

“Hi, sweetheart. I’m so glad Barney is okay.”

“Yeah.” A long sigh. “Me too. That scared the shit out of me.”

“I know. It scared me too. But I hear he’s going to be perfectly fine.”

“Yes, eventually. But he looks so pathetic. I can’t leave him.”

“I know exactly how you feel. But I really wish you would come.
He’ll be fine with Dr. Landross. The way he’s feeling right now, he probably won’t be all that aware of who’s looking after him. And you have over a hundred people in the shuttle bay right now who want to see you.”

“I know, but…”

“Lynne, this is your last chance to see them. The travel restrictions have been lifted on the Maquis—you know they’re going to be all over the quadrant by this time tomorrow. And by the time we get back from our leave, I’m sure that half my crew will be on other starships. This is it. If you don’t come tonight, I really think you’ll regret it for a long, long time.”

“God, Kathryn, it’s not that I don’t want to come!”

Kathryn put a hand to her forehead. “Do you remember when you had the Tankaran flu and I had to leave you behind to negotiate that stupid trade agreement?”

“Barely. I wasn’t too alert that day.”

“That’s my point. I worried myself sick over you all damn day long and when I finally got back to the ship, you didn’t even know I’d been gone. You slept through it.”

After a long pause, Lynne said, “Are you hitting me over the head with an object lesson?”

“Yes. Barney will be under expert medical care with Dr. Landross, just like you were with Revi. And you can come here and worry yourself sick over him, and when you get back he won’t even have noticed. So you might as well come here and not worry yourself sick. You can leave him in the hands of a professional, whom you trust, and enjoy the last great party of the Voyager crew.”

She waited several seconds, and when she heard the sigh she knew Lynne was coming.

“All right. You’re right. But I can’t guarantee that I won’t worry myself sick.”

“That’s your prerogative as a mother. But I’m betting that once you get here, you might be surprised at how good a time you manage to have.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She could actually hear Lynne’s smile through the comm link. “Okay. Gretchen and I will be there in about twenty minutes.”

“Great. We’re all looking forward to seeing you.”

They signed off, and Kathryn headed back into the party, feeling a lot better about their evening. Alison and Elise were still by the refreshment
table, talking to…was that Harry? With a wide smile, she headed straight for them. “Harry!”

“Captain!” His grin was blinding. “You look fantastic. Congratulations on the amnesty, that was quite a coup.”

“Congratulate Lynne, she’s the one who did it.” She set her glass down and pulled him into a quick hug. He’d always been her favorite and it was truly a joy to see him now.

When she released him, his grin was even wider. “So where is Lynne?”

“At the vet. Did you hear we acquired a kitten?”

“Alison was just telling me the story. I only wish there were security logs of you and Lynne hiding from a marauding kitten in the barn.”

“If there were security logs, Lieutenant, you wouldn’t have the clearance to view them.” Kathryn picked up her glass. “Anyway, Barney caught some kind of virus, so Lynne and Mom took him to the vet. He’ll be fine,” she added, meeting Alison’s eyes and seeing the relieved nod. “But Mom reports that Lynne is now in what she calls ‘full kitten mother mode’. I had to talk her into leaving him and coming here.”

“But she is coming?” asked Elise.

“Yes, she and Mom are on their way. They’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

“Good. Because I have a little something to say to her about that amnesty.”

Kathryn looked at her sharply, but relaxed when she saw the smile. “Do you know, I actually forgot that she hasn’t dealt with the board on that yet. We’ve been a little preoccupied.”

“Yes, I can see why. Don’t worry, I’m still on her side. She might need to tread a bit lightly at the next meeting, though. I can give her some ideas on how to pitch that for minimum fallout.”

“That would be wonderful, Elise, thank you!” She hadn’t expected that.

“Well, she’s going to need allies. Especially with Adele already hating her on sight.” Elise flashed a rakish grin. “Though there are other people on that board probably liking her more for that exact reason.”

God, the politics would never end. “I’m sure she’ll be grateful for the insights,” said Kathryn. “But don’t talk business to her too much, all right? This is a night for celebration.”
“I understand.” Elise lifted her glass and clinked it to Kathryn’s. “To happy endings.”

Harry and Alison joined in, and they drank a quiet toast.

“Where’s Celes?” asked Kathryn.

“Over talking to the Delaney sisters.” Harry glanced across the shuttle bay. “I, uh, do have some news of my own, Captain.” The blush gave his news away long before he said, “Celes and I are engaged.”

“Well, congratulations!” Happily, she gave him his second hug of the evening. “She’s a sweet woman. I think you’ll be very happy together.”

“I think so too.” His blush intensified, and Kathryn gave him a moment to recover by turning to Alison and Elise.

“Tal Celes is another member of my crew. She and Harry didn’t get together until the last year of our voyage.”

“Wow, another Voyager wedding,” said Alison. “I’m beginning to wonder how any of you got anything else done.” She winked at Harry. “Congratulations!”

Elise joined in, though of course she didn’t know either Harry or Celes from Adam. Nevertheless, her innate courtesy made her congratulations sound as sincere as if she’d known them for years. Kathryn watched her with a new eye, thinking about her as a partner for Alison. Two very strong and independent women, with demanding careers and probably conflicting goals at times…she smiled. Sounds familiar.

“Speaking of Voyager weddings, let’s go say hi to B’Elanna and Tom,” she said.

Alison looked over at the chief engineer. “B’Elanna is engaged too?”

“Not anymore,” said Harry. “Married with a baby on the way.”

“What else did you people do on this ship?”

Both Kathryn and Harry had to laugh at that, and the foursome made their way over to B’Elanna and her family. She turned, seeing them approach, and her face split into a wide grin as she closed the last few steps and hugged Kathryn. “Hi! Kahless, it’s so good to see you again! It feels like it’s been months. Harry!” She let go of Kathryn and went into Harry’s arms, both of them laughing. Tom was next, slapping Harry’s back affectionately and then looking with interest toward Alison and Elise. Kathryn introduced them to both him and Miral, observing with amusement that Tom was trying to hide his appreciation. He might be married, but he still had the eyes of a flyboy. And just as clearly, B’Elanna
saw it but felt no threat, as she simply smacked him on the arm while returning to her mother’s side. “Everyone, this is my mother, Miral,” she announced. “Mother, I’d like you to meet Captain Janeway and our friend Harry.”

“How do you do,” said Miral in the oddly formal cadence of a Klingon trying to meet Human social standards. “I’m pleased to meet you.”

“I’m delighted to meet you,” said Kathryn, shaking her hand. “And so glad you were able to come. It’s a long way from Kessik Four.”

“It was...worth the flight,” said Miral, looking at B’Elanna with obvious pride. “To see B’Elanna here, with the respect of so many people...”

“Including the very deep respect of her captain,” said Kathryn. “B’Elanna became one of my most trusted officers, and she saved all of our butts too many times to count.”

B’Elanna looked a little embarrassed as her mother beamed at her. “I’m not the only one who saved Voyager,” she said. “Mother, Alison is the woman I was telling you about—the one who suspected the sabotage and made sure we got a warning. And I never got a chance to thank you,” she added to Alison. “If I’d known the night we were in your office, I’d have been a little more vocal in your defense.”

“As I recall, you’re the one who told Seven I was innocent until proven guilty,” said Alison. “How much more vocal could you get?” She looked around in confusion as Kathryn, Tom and Harry all laughed loudly. “Did I say something amusing?”

“Don’t pay any attention to them,” said B’Elanna, smacking Tom on the arm again. “And don’t believe any of the stories they might tell you.”

“I must thank you as well, for saving my daughter.” Miral held out her hand and Alison reached for it automatically, her face showing her surprise as her forearm was clasped in the Klingon warrior gesture.

“I only got a warning to them,” said Alison. “I’m not the one who found the problem.”

“No, but B’Elanna tells me they would never have looked for a problem had they not had your warning. Do not dismiss your courage,” said Miral, squeezing Alison’s arm once more before letting her go. “Not many have the strength to act on their instincts as you did. Had you not acted, the p’tahk responsible for that cowardly act of sabotage would have won, and everyone in this room would have died far from home. Melanie
Hamilton should have had enough honor to face her enemy rather than hiding behind sabotage and assassins.” Her face clearly showed her disgust for such cowardice.

With an uneasy glance at Elise, B’Elanna said, “To be fair, Mother, if Melanie had faced her directly, Lynne would have kicked her ass across all four quadrants.”

Kathryn laid a light hand on Elise’s shoulder, offering her silent support while she waited to see whether Elise would acknowledge her relationship with Melanie. Klingon culture visited the dishonor of the parents onto the children, and she would not allow Miral to think that Elise had not acted to counter that dishonor.

Elise took a casual sip of her drink and said, “Melanie Hamilton’s biggest mistake was not her failure to face her enemy. It was the fact that she saw enemies where there were none. And I don’t believe that’s a failing limited to Humans, is it? I understand it’s quite common among the great houses of Kronos.”

Miral’s brows drew together, then relaxed as she laughed. “You speak true,” she said. “There are feuds among the great houses that have gone on for so long now that no one can remember why they started. Good warriors and statesmen die because they refuse to step back and learn who their enemies really are. Do you study Klingon politics?” she asked curiously.

“I have business connections on Kronos,” said Elise. “It’s in my best interests to have some understanding of the political situation.”

Kathryn patted her shoulder and dropped her hand. It looked like Elise needed no one to fight her battles for her.

“Hold on,” said B’Elanna, interrupting Miral’s next question. “I just realized that someone’s missing from this reunion. Where’s Lynne?”

Kathryn explained, for what now felt like the seventeenth time, and then Harry told them that they had to hear the story of how the kitten was found. After much prodding, Kathryn told the story, embellishing it just a little bit for dramatic effect, and had all of them laughing except for Miral. But then, full Klingons rarely laughed at any story that didn’t involve glory, and there was precious little glory in Kathryn and Lynne hiding while their hired security officers dealt with the threat of a kitten. For a moment Kathryn had a glimpse of the vast differences between B’Elanna and her mother, and she swiftly turned the conversation toward
a different story—one in which she could rightfully paint B’Elanna as a heroic character.

They were in the middle of yet another story from their journey when Kathryn saw a transporter beam shimmering across the cargo bay. With a happy twinge in her stomach, she waited for the two forms to materialize and raised her arm to wave Lynne and Gretchen over. God, Lynne looked gorgeous in that uniform. She saw Kathryn, waved back and started into the crowd.

At that moment, a male voice boomed out over the ship’s PA system, quickly reducing the conversational roar to absolute silence.

“…computer has detected the lifesign of Lynne Hamilton,” said the voice. “You will take her to Transporter Room Two and use the transport coordinates that you will find programmed on the console. The end of this message will activate Voyager’s autodestruct sequence with a ten-minute countdown. The moment Lynne Hamilton is delivered to those coordinates, I will recall the autodestruct. I do not wish to harm any innocents. But if she is not delivered to those coordinates before nine minutes and fifty seconds, there will be no recall of the autodestruct. This is your only warning.”

The message ended, immediately followed by an all too familiar chime from the computer. “Warning. Self-destruct sequence has been initiated. Warp core overload in nine minutes, fifty-five seconds.”

Lynne stared at her from across the bay, and for just a second Kathryn saw nothing in the room but her. Then her awareness came back, along with her instincts, as she realized that every face was turned toward her expectantly. “Computer, cancel self-destruct sequence, authorization Janeway theta nine zero nine.”

“Command code not recognized. Warp core overload in nine minutes, fifty seconds.”

“Computer, state all personnel currently holding recognized command codes for Voyager.”

“Admiral Alynna Necheyev and Captain Kathryn Janeway hold currently recognized command codes for Voyager.”

She wasn’t surprised that Chakotay’s and Tuvok’s codes had been stripped, but it left her fewer options. “Will the command codes of Admiral Necheyev be sufficient to cancel the self-destruct sequence?”

“Negative. Self-destruct sequence will not respond to currently recognized
command codes for Voyager.”

Make that one option. A self-destruct sequence could not be manually cancelled; it was intentionally designed that way to prevent an enemy from stopping the sequence and taking the ship. If the computer would not respond to any recognized command codes, then the only way to keep the ship intact was to dump the warp core. But that only worked in space, where the ship could get away from the core before it blew. Here on the ground, the outcome of the overload would be the utter destruction of not just Voyager, but the entire city of San Francisco—and its two million inhabitants.

But to take Voyager from total shutdown to full power and liftoff required eight minutes. And they needed not just liftoff, but enough time to fly through the atmosphere and get far out of Earth’s orbit, away from all satellites and shipping lanes. It could not be done.

There was no alternative.

“All right, people,” she said in a voice designed to carry to all corners of the room. “I need everyone not critical to liftoff and flight operations to stay right here. All critical personnel, report to your stations at once. Seven, go with B’Elanna to Engineering and make sure that core is ready to be dumped on my mark. Tom, you’re at helm. Harry, get Admiral Necheyev on the comm and route the call to the bridge. We’re going to need emergency clearance through all shipping lanes first, and emergency beamoff of everyone in this bay second. Tuvok and Chakotay, I need you to coordinate the beamoff. Let’s go!”

The critical crew immediately headed for the shuttlebay doors, with Kathryn, Tom and B’Elanna right on their heels. As they neared the doors, Kathryn found Lynne striding beside her and stopped short. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“With you.”

“Lynne—”

“Not negotiable,” said Lynne tightly. “If he gets you and not me, he wins bigger than he ever dreamed. I won’t let it happen. We’re wasting time.”

“Shit!” Kathryn turned and jogged for the doors, with Lynne at her elbow. She had no time to argue.
Alison watched the doors close behind Kathryn and Lynne, her pulse racing from the adrenaline rush of hearing that announcement. Part of her couldn’t believe it was happening, but from the reaction of the crew, it clearly wasn’t a joke or a dream. This ship was about to blow up.

“Alison…”

She looked over to meet Elise’s wide eyes. “It will be all right, Elise. These people are professionals.”

“They can’t get this ship off the ground in nine minutes, can they?”

Alison wished she knew more about the limitations of ship designs. “I’m not sure. Maybe, but they’re going to have to cut a lot of corners to make it.”

“What will happen if they don’t make it out?” asked Miral.

“If the warp core blows in Earth’s atmosphere? Armageddon. Far worse than having it blow right here in San Francisco. But Kathryn won’t let that happen.”

“So they have to get it past Earth’s satellite orbit,” said Elise. “And they probably won’t have time to dump the core.”

Alison nodded slowly, the reality of the situation just now slipping past her instinctive disbelief. “I think…I think the people who went through that door won’t be coming back.”

Elise let out a sound of pure agony, and as Alison reached for her she turned away. Miral stared at her in shock. “My daughter is going to die?”

“If they don’t get this ship out of the danger zone, the damage to Earth will be incalculable,” said Alison. “They all know it. And they all know that a handful of lives is a small price to pay for saving the rest.”

“Heghlu’meH QaQ jajvam,” said Miral, a fierce look coming over her face. “Today is a good day to die. My daughter will die a glorious death, in the defense of her people. She will meet the greatest warriors in Sto-vo-kor and hold up her head with pride!”

Elise spun in place. “Your daughter will die an unnecessary death! She’s going to die because of greed and revenge!”

Miral shook her head. “It doesn’t matter why she dies. It only matters how.”

Elise stared at her in disbelief. “Then you may be the only person on this ship who can find a benefit to this disaster. I congratulate you.”

Commander Tuvok came up next to Alison. “Dr. Necheyev, we will be beaming people off the ship in groups of six. Please join those individuals
—” he indicated two men and a woman in Starfleet uniforms— “maintain your group, and stand in the line there.” Shifting, he pointed across the bay. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Alison. “Thank you, Commander.”

He nodded, then went to the next cluster of people. Alison grabbed Elise’s hand and led her little group to join the Starfleet crew. “You folks really know how to throw a party,” she joked weakly.

“Don’t worry,” said one of the men. “Captain Janeway will take care of this. She always does.”

“That’s what I hear,” said Alison. She looked up at Elise, her next sentence dying in her throat. The words did not exist that could address the devastation on Elise’s face.

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By the time Kathryn, Lynne and Tom reached the bridge, Admiral Necheyev was already on the main viewer. “What the hell is going on?” she demanded with no preamble. “Voyager is in self-destruct?”

“A parting gift from our Cardassian friend,” said Kathryn. “It activated as soon as Voyager’s computer recognized Lynne’s lifesign. We can’t shut it down. We’re throwing out the checklist and getting this ship off the ground, and I hope to god none of your technicians have disconnected anything we need. Tom, how long before liftoff?”

“Six minutes,” said Tom, his fingers flying over the board.

“Admiral, I need clearance for a straight shot out of here. And you need to get any civilians away from the grounds around this ship. I also have about ninety people still in my shuttlebay who need immediate transport off the ship. That’s not counting any of your staff.” There were almost certainly technicians still on Voyager, but if they remembered an iota of their training, they’d already used the transporter rooms to get off the ship. She hadn’t dared to try that option—running people between the shuttlebay and the transporter rooms, while simultaneously trying to coordinate a reverse transport from Starfleet, would have been an even bigger disaster than the one she already had on her hands.

“One moment.” Necheyev turned away from the viewer and began typing in a furious series of commands while barking orders to someone
on another terminal. Kathryn checked the countdown on her chair console and cringed.

“Tom, six minutes is ninety seconds too long. Shave something off the checklist.”

“I’m already down to the critical items.”

“Then drop some! We don’t have time!”

Necheyev turned back to the screen. “I’ve sent out the orders. I hope the city police can get the grounds cleared in time. And as far as I know, no critical engine components have been deactivated. Hold on, I’m sending over the coordinates for your liftoff trajectory and post-orbital flight.”

“Got it,” said Tom a few seconds later. “Course input.”

The engines came online, sounding sluggish as they powered up from their one-month rest. Kathryn had a sudden thought. “Janeway to Kim. Are the shuttle bay doors shut?”

“They are now,” said Kim. “The first batch has already been beamed off. Everything’s under control here.”

“Beamoff of noncritical personnel is underway,” Kathryn said.

“We’re not going to get it done in time before your liftoff,” said Necheyev. “Our cargo transporter is down for weekly maintenance; who’d have thought we’d need it on a Saturday night? Okay, who’s in orbit, come on, come on…” She looked at another terminal. “Not big enough… oh, thank god. The Independence just entered orbit this afternoon. Captain, you’ll be paced by the Independence until they finish the job or you give the word for them to break off. They’ve got multiple transporter rooms plus several cargo bay transporters. They’ll be able to get everyone that doesn’t make it off here.”

“Understood.” Kathryn called Kim and relayed the information. The engine hum began climbing up the sound register as the power built, and she drummed her fingers on the chair rest, listening to Necheyev snap orders to the captain of the Independence and chafing at her inability to do anything more.

“This is why he smiled,” Lynne said from Chakotay’s chair.

“Who?”

“Gohat. When he was dying, he looked me in the eye and smiled at me. I thought it was because he was escaping. But he knew he would still win in the end.”
“He’s not going to win.” But she had her doubts.
“Bet you’re sorry you talked me into coming.”
“No, I’m not. You would have boarded this ship at one time or another. I’m glad it happened now, with all of us here to deal with it. It could have been so much worse.”
“Thrusters firing,” said Tom. “I did two short bursts in case the grounds haven’t been cleared. That should scare off any civilians.”
“Good idea, Tom. Janeway to Torres. Are you in position?”
“We’re going through the release sequence now. The warp core will be ready to jettison in three minutes.”
“I really hope you can do it thirty seconds faster.”
“Only if we bypass every safety protocol, which might cause it to blow sooner.”
“Do it anyway.”
“Understood.”
She felt a very slight shift of balance just as Tom said, “We’re off the ground. Bringing up landing gear.”
On screen, Admiral Necheyev ordered Starfleet Transport to cease operations after the next batch.
Kathryn imagined the struts coming up into the belly of her ship. She wished they didn’t have to wait for this stage, but going through the atmosphere with their struts hanging out would accelerate their destruction considerably. She glanced at the scrolling numbers on her console, closing her eyes briefly at the doom she read there. They were not going to make it.
“Janeway to Kim. How many left?”
“Twenty-seven.”
A tiny vibration of the plating under her feet told her the struts were in place even before Tom announced it. “Lifting off,” he said.
Kathryn put their forward sensors on the main viewer and switched the call to Necheyev over to her chair console. The Golden Gate Bridge was coming closer and closer, and Tom didn’t have enough time to clear it. For the second time in history, a starship flew beneath the bridge. But this time there were no crowds and no fireworks.

“We’re in flight,” announced Commander Chakotay to the
remaining people in the cargo bay. “We can’t transport in the atmosphere, so all operations are suspended until we break into clear space. The Independence will do a mass transport the moment it’s safe.”

Alison cast a worried glance at Elise, whose hand was trembling in hers. “They’ll get us off,” she whispered. “They’re good at this.”

Elise gave her a look of scorching disdain. “Do you honestly believe I care about whether I get off this ship?” She jerked her hand out of Alison’s and walked straight for the shuttlebay doors.

“Elise…” Alison went after her, reaching for her hand again, only to have it yanked away as Elise broke into a run. “Elise!”

Commander Chakotay intercepted her at the doors. “Ms. Hamilton, I need you to get back in line.”

“No!” She tried to go past him, but he sidestepped—and was taken by surprise when she suddenly shoved him to the side and went through the doors. Both Chakotay and Alison were hot on her heels.

Perhaps driven by fear, Alison got to her first, pushing her straight into a bulkhead with her body. “You are not doing this!” she said, grabbing for Elise’s wrists.

“Get back in there!” Elise said furiously. “You don’t have time for this!”

“No, we don’t! So come on!”

“Ms. Hamilton, I understand that you’re frightened,” Chakotay began, only to be silenced by the iciest glare Alison had ever seen.

“I am not frightened. I’ve never been so clear-headed in my entire life. And I refuse to beam off this ship.”

“Why?” asked Chakotay in astonishment. “Do you want to die?”

“She deserves it!” Elise looked at Alison, her glare crumbling into that same look of devastation she’d worn earlier. “Alison, don’t you see what’s happening? They couldn’t stop it. Lynne’s going to die anyway. And there is no punishment big enough to make up for that. Except one.”

“Please don’t,” Alison whispered. “You’ll be punishing me, too. And I haven’t done anything.”

Elise stared at her, unable to speak.

“We don’t have time for this,” said Chakotay. “Ms. Hamilton, you’re leaving, now.” He seized her arm, yanked her away from the wall and twisted the arm behind her, wrenching a cry of pain from her that broke Alison’s heart. “Let’s go.”
Alison trailed behind them, horrified at Elise’s treatment but knowing it had to be done. They were down to the seconds now. When they reentered the cargo bay, half of the remaining people were already gone.

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**Kathryn watched her chair console,** waiting for the very moment that they cleared enough of the atmosphere to begin transport. The viewscreen was dark, the forward sensors blinded by their passage through the atmosphere. It was the graphs on her console showing outside gas measurements that gave her the information she needed. The lines sank steadily, and in her peripheral vision she saw the viewscreen reactivate, but they weren’t there yet. She focused on the console. A little more…a little more…there. She dropped the shields.

“Janeway to Independence. Begin transport now. Get all life signs except those in engineering and on the bridge.”

“Transport underway.”

She looked up at the screen, seeing the massive ship already pacing them. It was going to be close, but at least they’d get everyone else off the ship.

“B’Elanna, you’ve got twenty-five seconds.”

“Dammit!”

“I need a better answer than that.” They were still in the danger zone, and the seconds were flying past.

“We’ll be ready.”

“I hope so.” There really wasn’t anything else to be done. Either the core could be ejected in time, or it couldn’t.

Lynne reached across and took her hand. “I love you for love’s sake only,” she said quietly, paraphrasing Kathryn’s favorite poem.

“In this life and beyond,” Kathryn answered, squeezing her hand. For a few precious seconds, she let herself sink into the most beautiful green eyes in the universe.

“Voyager, transport is complete. We’ll stay with you as long as we can.”

“Thank you, Independence,” she said, still looking at Lynne. They would not have time to beam off, but then she’d already known that. Once before, she had stood still and counted the seconds, waiting to see if she would live or die. But that had been on a Borg ship, with Lynne lost to
her. Here, sitting on her own bridge, holding Lynne’s hand...she was content.

“Full impulse!” Tom announced.
Kathryn dragged her eyes from Lynne’s, but never let go of her hand. Watching the readouts on her console, she held her breath as the countdown and the time to open space converged. Four seconds before zero she called, “B’Elanna, now!”

Either she could, or she couldn’t...

“Warp core away!” came the response, and Kathryn raised the shields, hardly able to believe it. She put the aft sensors on the viewscreen and watched the explosion, a silent blossoming of light and power. It was beautiful, in a way. And it was far too close.

“Brace for impact!”

The shockwave swept outward, roaring toward them and hitting their shields with enough force to tilt Voyager nearly sixty degrees. Her safety belt cut painfully into her chest and shoulders as she lost her grip on her chair arms, but when the ship stabilized she was still in place, breathing hard from the exertion. A quick glance showed both Lynne and Tom still in their chairs as well, though considerably shaken up. She probably looked the same.

“B’Elanna, report.”

The response took just a little too long, setting her heart thumping painfully in her chest.

“We’re all right. Both of us. Got a bit tossed around, though.”

Kathryn laid her head on the back of her chair and took a moment simply to breathe.

“Independence to Voyager. Everyone all right over there?”

“We’re fine, thank you. A little shaken up, but no injuries. Thanks for your help, and for sticking by us.”

“Our pleasure. We’ll escort you back in.”

She signed off, then contacted Admiral Necheyev’s office. The admiral came on screen immediately, her relief plain to see before she cleared her throat and said, “Well, Captain Janeway, you just saved me a ship. Not to mention a city. But you did lose a warp core. So...I suppose we’ll call it even for that, and for the lost Cardassian.”

Kathryn gave her a tired smile. “In that case, I’d like to start my leave now, before I rack up any more debt. These payments are a killer.”
Alison sat on the cargo bay floor next to Elise, watching as Revi passed a humming component of her Borg arm over Elise’s shoulder. “I do apologize for the Commander,” Revi said. “It’s not necessary to tear muscles with a hammerlock.”

“Don’t bother,” said Elise. “He did what he had to do; there were only a few seconds left. I don’t blame him.” She looked up. “Why did you come with us?”

“Pardon me?”

“Lynne stayed with Kathryn because she was sure they weren’t going to make it. I heard her. But you left Seven behind.”

Revi never paused in her ministrations. “Because I’m in constant telepathic contact with Seven. I knew exactly where they were in the process of dumping the core, and Seven was certain they would do it in time. I trusted her.”

“Wow,” said Elise. “Constant contact? That’s handy.”

Revi smiled. “It can be.”

“Are you part Betazoid?”

“No, part Borg.”

“Her father is Human,” said Dhara, who was watching the process with fascination. “But I’m beginning to think it would have been better if he had been Betazoid.”
Revi chuckled. “I think that’s probably the worst thing you could ever say to him.”

Alison listened to the conversation silently, her stomach still roiling from the panic she’d felt when she’d understood Elise’s intent. It was slowly morphing into something else, now that the crisis was over and the captain of the Independence had told them Voyager was safe, but she was trying to tamp that down.

They were the only ones left in the cargo bay, all the others having accepted the captain’s personal invitation to adjourn to the lounge on deck ten. Alison, who’d seen the pain Elise was trying to hide, had wanted to take her to the sickbay—but then Revi was there, asking what had happened and assuring them that she had the tools to take care of it. And indeed she did, built right into that amazing cybernetic arm. Her mother seemed just as mesmerized by it as Alison was, if not more so, and Alison wondered if she’d never seen it before now.

“All done,” announced Revi, pulling her shirt sleeve back down. “How does it feel?”

Elise rolled her shoulder, then gingerly put her arm behind her back to test it. “Good as new. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It’s the least I can do to make up for the way you were handled. I’m going to go give Chakotay a piece of my mind now.”

“You really don’t need to on my account—”

“Oh, but I need to on my account.” Revi stood, picked up her jacket and slid her arm into it. Her mother held up the other sleeve for her, and Revi paused for just a moment before thanking her and pushing her other arm in. “The Commander has been a little overzealous once before. He tried something like that with me once and got himself thrown across the room as a result.”

“You threw that man across a room?” Elise was shocked. “He’s not a lightweight!”

“Neither am I. Part Borg, remember?”

“Good lord. Remind me never to mess with you.”

Dhara looked vastly amused for some reason. “I do wish your father could be hearing this conversation,” she said. Revi looked up in surprise, and something passed between them that Alison didn’t understand.

“Shall we head for the lounge?” Revi asked.
Alison spoke for the first time. “If you don’t mind, I’d like a word with Elise. We’ll join you in a few minutes.”

Revi looked back and forth between them, then nodded. “We’ll see you there. Mother?”

Elise wouldn’t meet her eyes as they waited, listening to Revi and Dhara walk out of the cargo bay. The doors slid open, then shut, and still Elise did not look up. Alison gave up trying to hold it in.

“Don’t you ever, ever do anything like that again! To me or anyone else. Do you understand me?”

“No, you didn’t think—”

“Alison, I don’t think—”

“‘No, you didn’t think! That’s the problem!’

Elise finally met her eyes, her own stormy. “I don’t need to hear this right now!”

“This is not just about you! Maybe you don’t need to hear it, but I need to say it. That was the most cruel thing you could ever do to me! Now, I know you’re upset about your mother, and God knows you have the right to be, but your life is precious! It’s also the most precious thing in my life right now, and I really don’t want to be starring in my own personal tragic love story. How could you?”

Elise dropped her face into her hands, her shoulders shaking. The sight effectively torpedoed Alison’s fury, and she immediately gathered her in her arms as her own tears rose. “God, you scared the hell out of me,” she whispered. “How could you think of throwing your life away just for revenge?”

“It wasn’t revenge!” Elise wiped her eyes and looked up.

“Then what was it?”

“It was…” She fell silent, and Alison nodded.

“You said she deserved it. Are you really going to try to convince me that wasn’t about revenge?”

“I thought it was justice,” Elise said in a tiny voice.

“Not for you. And not for me, or for Lynne. She was willing to die for love. You were going to die for anger. And I would never, ever have forgiven you for it.”

Elise tucked her face into Alison’s neck and wept so silently that Alison only recognized it through the shuddering breaths. “I don’t know what to do anymore,” she said, her voice muffled as she burrowed into their embrace. “I just can’t handle it. I thought I’d put that in its place,
but every time my guard is down it comes out and kicks me again. I’m angry at her, angry at myself, and the only bright light in my life is you, and now you’re angry with me too…”

“Elise, no, no, shhh…” Alison squeezed her tightly. “I’m not angry with you.” A snort indicated Elise’s disbelief, and Alison rephrased. “Okay. Two seconds ago I was furious, but now you’re breaking my heart. Listen, please…I was angry because you just tried to kill yourself right in front of my eyes, and that says you don’t care about yourself or us. That really hurts.”

“What?” Elise lifted her head. “I don’t care about us?”

“Well, what am I supposed to think?”

She considered it, her breathing coming back to normal as her mind worked. “Okay,” she said at last. “I can see why you’d think that. But it wasn’t…it had nothing to do with us.”

“Maybe not, but it certainly would have impacted us. No, cancel that, it would have impacted *me*. You wouldn’t have been around anymore to feel the consequences.”

With a wince, Elise pulled away, wiping her cheeks. “I wasn’t thinking that far. I was just…” She paused. “Alison, I care more about us than anything else in my life right now. Please believe that.”

“Do you care about yourself?”

“I’m not suicidal, all right?”

Alison had never imagined Elise could be, but she was so shaken by what she’d just witnessed that she no longer knew what to believe.

“Then promise me right now that you’ll never do anything that bone-headed again,” she said. “You have every right to be angry with your mother. She betrayed your trust. And you’ve been going through your days doing your damnedest to set that aside, but it doesn’t work that way. You’re just going to have to let yourself feel it. It’s the only way you’ll get through it.”

Elise shook her head miserably. “I can’t.”

“You can’t what? Be angry with her, or promise me?”

“I promise never to do anything like that again,” Elise said immediately.

“Thank God for that.” Alison kissed her cheek, tasting salt and feeling her heart break a little more. “And thank you. So why can’t you be angry with her?”
There was a long pause while Elise stared unseeingly at the far wall of the cargo bay. At last she said, “Do you remember the morning after we first made love?”

“Like I could possibly forget?”

That surprised a smile out of Elise, who glanced over before returning her gaze to the opposite wall. “We were having such a lovely, sweet time in bed,” she said. “And I just wanted to lie there with you forever and enjoy it, and then you told me about how you and your aunt play the ‘need to know’ game. How you keep things confidential from her because of your job, and vice versa, and how you had to dance all around that when you were first dealing with your suspicions about Voyager.”

“I remember. I wanted to lie there forever, too. But you had to shower and get some food in your stomach.”

“No, I didn’t. I just had to leave.”

Though hurt, Alison did her best to keep her voice steady. “Why?”

“Because when you said that about your aunt, it was like a knife in my heart. I didn’t live up to those standards. I didn’t keep things confidential from my mother. So I don’t have the right to be angry with her. Not without being equally angry at myself. It’s my fault. Those fucking bastards almost got Lynne after all. Even after every damn one of them died, they almost got her, and quite a few innocent, incredibly courageous people besides, and it’s my fault. I have nowhere to go with that.”

Suddenly Alison saw her actions in a whole new light. “Oh, Elise. It was justice, wasn’t it? You were trying to redeem yourself.”

“I can never make up for it,” she whispered, dropping her gaze to the floor.

Alison ducked her head, trying to catch her eye. “You already have.”

“When?”

“When you gave Lynne and Kathryn the one tool they needed to put an end to this.”

Elise shook her head dismissively. “The recording? That hardly counts.”

“The recording that tore your guts out and left you shivering for half a goddamned day? You couldn’t get warm again, not even after one of your boiling showers, not even sitting practically inside the fireplace. Just how much do you think you have to suffer before you’ve paid a big enough price?”
Another head shake, but this one was subdued. “I don’t know.”

Alison reached out for her hand, rubbing it between her own and noting that it was far too cold. “You aren’t the only person who makes mistakes. And that’s all this was, a mistake. You didn’t betray Lynne. You made a simple and very understandable mistake in judgment. She’s already forgiven you. I think it’s time you forgave yourself.”

Elise let out a mirthless chuckle. “That’s a tall order.”

“You know, I am really starting to hate your mother.”

That brought her head up. “Why?”

“Because she’s the one who pounded this stupid concept of perfection into your brain. You can’t deal with not being perfect. But nobody is perfect.”

“You’re pretty close,” said Elise quietly.

“No, I’m not. Here’s my confession. Do you remember our first night of making love?”

That earned her a very small smile. “Like I could possibly forget?”

“Right. And we had a conversation in the wee hours of the morning, and you told me that when I get angry, I know how to hurt a person.”

The smile vanished. “I remember.”

“I hurt Lynne because I was angry with her.”

Elise’s eyes widened. “What did you do?”

This was harder to say than she’d thought it would be. “We were at the Presidential Office, getting ready for our meeting with Gutierrez, and when we went through the security check, Lynne shocked the hell out of me by pulling two huge knives out of her boots.”

“Whoa.” Elise’s eyes were even bigger.

“Yes, that’s what I thought. And then I started to think about whether she’d been carrying those knives when she came bursting into my house the day of that second assassination attempt, when she was so angry and had me pushed up against my living room wall. So I asked her, and she said yes, she carries them all the time. She said she and Kathryn would be dead now if she didn’t. But I didn’t hear that second part. I just heard the yes. And I got furious at thinking that she’d carried weapons into my house in that kind of mood. So I asked her point blank if she would have killed me.”

Elise sucked in a breath. “Jesus Christ, Alison.”

“And she cried,” Alison said, still pained by the memory. “I made her
cry, because I spoke in the heat of anger and didn’t think it through, and I hit her in a place that has never healed. And I felt about this big.” She held her forefinger and thumb a half centimeter apart. “We had a little talk afterward, and she really put some things in perspective for me. That woman is amazing. But the point is, everyone makes mistakes. Of the two of us, I think I hurt Lynne more. Your mistake wasn’t personal. Mine was, and on top of that it was cruel. And the worst part is that I didn’t even fully realize it until days later. That night in bed with you, actually.” She gave Elise a tentative smile. “You’ve already taught me a few things about myself. Not all of them are things I particularly wanted to know. But you make me want to be better than I am, because of the example you set for me.”

“But…” Elise was confounded. “That’s exactly how I feel about you.”

“Does that mean I’m an okay person?”

“Of course you are. What kind of a question is that?”

Alison ducked her head, looking up at her. “Then it means you must be an okay person, too.”

Their eyes met briefly before Elise looked away again, unable to hold their gaze. Alison could see that she’d given her a lot to think about, and knew it wasn’t all going to happen right now. And her butt was tired of sitting on the deck, and if they stayed here much longer, Revi might send out a search party.

“Come on,” she said, rising to her feet and holding out a hand. “Let’s go get a drink. God knows I could use one.”

“I could use five.” Elise allowed herself to be helped up, then wiped her cheeks again and offered a small smile. “Where’s that Starfleet kerchief when I need it?”

Without a word, Alison drew the scarf from around her neck and gently dabbed at Elise’s cheeks and eyes, soaking up the few tears that hadn’t already dried. Two more leaked out in the process, and as she went back to get them she said, “Is this a ploy to keep me here?”

“No. I just…” Elise took a deep breath. “Thank you for taking care of me. Again.”

Alison looked into her eyes, amazed all over again at how intense they were. “The day will come when I need someone to take care of me. And I am so glad to know you’ll be there.”

“I will,” she whispered, and Alison knew it was a promise.
Voyager was directed to dock in Earth Station McKinley—ironically, the same shipyard it had been originally launched from. Kathryn found a certain symmetry in that, even as she recognized the pragmatism of Starfleet’s decision. They weren’t about to bring Voyager back to Earth until it had been checked top to bottom for any more Cardassian surprises. As it was, Necheyev was already breathing fire in the corridors of Starfleet Headquarters, demanding to know how an outside source could have rigged a ship’s self-destruct sequence and locked out the command codes. It was a breach of security with potentially devastating consequences to the fleet, and had just become the single highest priority at Starfleet Intelligence.

But that wasn’t Kathryn’s concern anymore, and Necheyev made it clear that she was not to worry about it. Specifically, she ordered her to “make sure that party lasts as long as it needs to.” When Kathryn pointed out that their party location probably had food and drink spattered from the deck to the ceiling, Necheyev made a humming sound and then told her to wait. Two minutes later she called back to announce that their party had now been moved to the forward lounge of the Independence, with the enthusiastic agreement of her captain. Starfleet Headquarters would directly beam up the crew on Earth who still wanted to join them.

“I do have one last duty for you before you begin your leave, Captain,” she added. “I want the names of every person who launched with you and maintained their posts. Whether they remain in Starfleet or not, they’re taking a medal home from this.”

“With pleasure, Admiral. I’m sending that data now.”

They signed off, and Kathryn happily sent the report straight to Necheyev’s office. She looked up to meet an amused smile from Lynne.

“Don’t,” Lynne said.

“You were here, too.”

“I didn’t have a duty to perform. I just wouldn’t let you leave me behind.”

Kathryn shrugged. “Too late. I already sent the report.”

“So I’m going to get a medal for being a passenger? Great. I’ll be sure to frame it and hang it on the wall.”

“And every time I look at it, I’ll remember the day you walked into
almost certain death with me, just so that I wouldn’t go there alone.” Kathryn would not let her minimize it.

Lynne’s expression shifted. “Don’t make it sound so selfless. I walked into it with you so that I wouldn’t be alone.”

“Do you really think there’s a difference?”

Before Lynne could answer, Tom announced that they were approaching McKinley, and Kathryn busied herself with docking preparations. It was odd, but watching the sides of the dock begin sliding past her ship gave her a stronger sense of coming home than when she’d landed on Earth last month. This was where it had all begun. Though Voyager had been built at Utopia Planitia, the official launch had taken place right here. This was where she had taken command, where Necheyev had formally turned over the command codes to her, and where she’d first sat in this chair knowing it was hers and no one else’s.

Voyager came to a smooth stop in the exact center of the station, and the docking clamps began locking on. “Nice flying, Tom,” she said. “All the way through. I don’t even want to know what you dropped off that checklist to get us off the ground in time.”

“No ma’am,” he said seriously. “You really don’t.”

She called B’Elanna to inform her and Seven of their arrival, and asked them to shut down any stations that had been left active by their tiny crew. Then she powered down her own console and, with a final glance at the scene outside, turned off the main viewer as well. The three of them rose from their chairs and walked to the turbolift doors, turning by unspoken agreement for one last look.

“Do you know, I think this ship is the biggest hero of all,” said Kathryn.

“I second that,” said Tom. “I’ll never fly another one like her. Voyager is special.”

Kathryn felt Lynne take her hand and squeezed it in gratitude. “Goodbye, old friend,” she whispered, scanning the bridge from one side to the other and trying to commit every detail to memory.

When the turbolift doors closed, shutting off her view of the bridge, she had a lump in her throat that could not be swallowed. This time it really did seem final. Somehow she knew that she’d never captain Voyager again.
Alison could not believe this crew. So far as she could see, every single person who’d beamed off on Earth had reappeared, and now the whole group was partying like nothing had happened, the laughter and conversation just as loud as it had been before all hell broke loose. She herself was barely capable of doing more than holding Elise’s hand and watching everyone else, her body occasionally shivering with a delayed reaction to the danger they’d all been in. Elise seemed to be in the same frame of mind, despite having downed three shots in a row immediately after their arrival at the lounge.

Revi and Dhara appeared in front of them, and the concern on Revi’s face was easily read. “Hey,” she said. “Are you two all right?”

Alison nodded. “Just coming down off the adrenaline high, I think. I don’t understand how you people can do this.”

Revi scanned the crowd. “You mean party like they might die tomorrow?”

“Exactly.”

“I know what you mean,” said Dhara. “I’m having a little difficulty with it myself. Starfleet people seem to be a breed apart.”

“The Voyager crew in particular is a breed apart,” said Revi. “These people lived seven years of a life you can’t imagine. I only shared the last
fifteen months of it with them, but that was enough to understand. When you know that you might never get home, and you stand a pretty good chance of dying a violent death long before you get there, you learn to take every bit of happiness and squeeze it for all it's worth. We're okay. Voyager is okay, San Francisco is still intact—these are things to celebrate. But mostly, they're celebrating the fact that once again, they're alive and free.”

“Life is precious,” said Elise, drawing a sharp glance from Alison.

“Yes, it is,” Revi agreed. Her head lifted, and she looked toward the lounge entrance with a wide smile. “We've got company. HEY!” she suddenly shouted to the crowd, waving her arms for attention. “The heroes return!”

The doors slid open, revealing Kathryn, Lynne, B'Elanna, Seven and Tom walking in. The roar that rose from the crowd was deafening, and it grew into sheer pandemonium as people shouted, applauded, tapped glasses with utensils, and generally made as much noise as they possibly could. Revi strode forward to meet Seven, enveloping her in a happy embrace and kissing her as if they had no audience at all. Which, Alison mused, they really didn’t. People were too focused on their own sense of joy to notice one tiny celebration of it.

Her own eyes were glued to Kathryn and Lynne, who were holding hands and managed to keep that grip even as they were mobbed, laughing and giving one-armed hugs to Gretchen, Phoebe, and then their friends, until finally the sheer volume of people pushed them apart. She felt the pricking of tears behind her eyes at the scene. Though she had no real part to play, she understood that this was a moment of legend, and she was fortunate to be here as witness.

“I wish my mom could see this,” said Elise as she watched. “Maybe then she’d understand.”

Alison doubted it, but she squeezed Elise's hand and dropped a kiss on her cheek. “What’s more important is that you understand.”

People in the crowd were calling for the story, and finally Kathryn raised her hands, quieting them down. “Well, you know that it takes eight minutes to get Voyager in the air from a powered-down state, right?”

An enthusiastic chorus of ‘rights’ answered her.

“Tom did it in four and a half.”
Another roar, and Tom’s back was slapped by half a dozen people around him.

“I asked him how many critical things he had to drop off the checklist to accomplish that, and he told me I really didn’t want to know.”

Though Alison didn’t see the humor in this, apparently everyone else in the room did. Kathryn had to wait for the laughter to die down before she could continue. “We cleared the atmosphere with twenty-five seconds left to get the rest of you off Voyager and dump the core,” she said, and Alison felt the shock of realizing just how close it had been. “I informed B’Elanna of this fact, and her response, as usual, was to swear at me.”

More laughter, and Alison began to realize just what was happening here.

“But also as usual, B’Elanna and Seven had it ready. They dumped the core four seconds before it blew. We had a bit of a rough ride through the shockwave, and Neelix, I’m very sorry, but your beautiful party spread is now on every surface in the shuttlebay. Whoever flies those shuttles the next time is going to be picking hors d’oeuvres from the seat cushions.”

Another roar of amusement, and this time even Alison smiled. It was impossible not to absorb the sheer sense of joy from this crowd.

“For those of you who staffed your posts—I’m so proud of you that I hardly know how to express it. You’re not even on duty and you acted with pure professionalism and amazing courage. I want you to know that my last official act before going on leave was to send all of your names to Admiral Necheyev. She says you’re not going home without a medal.”

Shouts, catcalls and whistles rose from the crowd, and Kathryn was mobbed once again. The music started up—with some surprise, Alison realized it was the same jazz trio who had beamed off Voyager—and the party swung right back into action. She watched a few couples head to the dance floor and wondered if she could manage that with Elise. The idea was very appealing, though she wasn’t yet sure her legs would carry her through a dance. When she turned to ask Elise what she thought, she found her intently watching one point in the room. Even before following her gaze, Alison knew she’d find Lynne at the other end of it.

“She’s all right,” she said. “Everyone is.”

“I know,” Elise answered, but her voice wasn’t normal and her grip on Alison’s hand was too tight.

As if sensing the eyes on her, Lynne looked up and smiled at them. She
said something to Kathryn, who nodded in response, and began to make her way over.

“You two look a little overwhelmed,” she said when she arrived. “Don’t worry, Voyager parties are always like this. Have another drink, it’ll help.”

Elise seemed frozen in place, and Alison tried to carry the conversation for them. “I think we’ve already had four or five drinks between us. So far they haven’t sunk in.”

“Adrenaline,” said Lynne. “It neutralizes synthehol. What you need is the real stuff, but I’m betting you have to have a personal relationship with the bartender here to get that.”

“Would you like a drink?” Alison asked. “I’d be happy to get you something from the bar. Maybe I can strike up a personal relationship.”

“Don’t make any romantic mistakes on my account. Besides, I can’t drink. Well, I can, but only my own special formula.”

“Really?” Alison seized on any topic to get them away from what she knew was killing Elise. “Why not? Do you have an allergy?”

“Sort of. My cortical implant doesn’t tolerate alcohol or synthehol. I get completely raving drunk on half a glass.”

“That’s the Borg implant in her head,” Alison told Elise. “Essentially this woman is a walking database with a very good memory.”

“And in my memories, you were a little more talkative,” said Lynne. “Are you all right?”

Elise stared at her. “I, ah…no, I don’t think so.”

“I’m really sorry.” A cloud darkened Lynne’s face. “I might have known those bastards would find a way to ruin the best thing I had planned. I’m seriously upset that everyone else got pulled in as well.”

“Why do you keep apologizing to me?” asked Elise sharply. Alison squeezed her hand in warning. “Elise is feeling responsible,” she said, trying to defuse the tension.

“I’m not feeling responsible, I am responsible. It’s a little hard to think of it as a small mistake when there are consequences like these.”

Lynne watched her thoughtfully. “You know, you’re starting to scare me, because I’m actually seeing a family resemblance.”

“What?”

“Elise…” Lynne sighed. “There are some things I can’t tell you, and I don’t know if you’ll believe me without the history, but the blame for this
whole gigantic mess is on my shoulders, not yours. A year and a half ago I made a choice that seemed to be the right one at the time, and sometimes I still think it was, but some of the consequences have been just awful. Mind-blowingly awful. My choice is what led to all of this. Your decision to tell your mother about me is only a tiny part of that. And I can see just how hard you’re beating yourself over the head with it, because believe me, that’s a Hamilton family trait. Please, stop it. You are not responsible.”

Frowning, Elise said, “That makes no sense. How could you possibly have caused all this?”

“It doesn’t make sense because I’m not free to give you the details. Just…trust me on this one.” She waited a moment, saw the extreme skepticism, and said, “Okay, let me try it from this angle. On a scale of one to ten, one being a white lie about liking Alison’s outfit when you really don’t, and ten being your mother trying to kill me, what you did was about a two. A two. Not a big deal. I’ve committed a couple of seven point fives in my time with Kathryn, so I know the difference. You need to let this go or it will eat you alive. And it’s not worth it.”

Elise gestured helplessly. “I want to let it go, but look at you! You almost died—along with all those others!”

Without another word, Lynne pulled her into an embrace. “I didn’t,” she said quietly. “See? I’m right here, and I’m fine. So is everyone else. Nobody died except four Cardassian assassins. And you, Cousin Elise, have got to stop freaking me out like this. Because I can’t believe how much you’re like me. How the hell did those Hamilton genetics stay intact for eleven generations?”

Elise wrapped her arms more tightly around Lynne’s back and laid her head on her shoulder, appearing for all the world as if she might never move again. Lynne looked over the top of her head at Alison, who nodded slowly. Yes. That’s exactly what she needs.

Closing her eyes, Lynne rested her head against Elise’s, their dark hair mingling as they held each other. Alison watched, fascinated by the physical dichotomy between the two women. Lynne was half a head taller, much broader-shouldered, and though her hair looked black from a distance, against Elise’s true black it was instantly recognizable as a dark brown—with streaks of silver that gave her a dignity she would probably
laugh off if Alison ever mentioned it. Elise was by far the more dignified, yet beneath her manner was a very similar sense of humor.

And from what she knew of both of them, they carried the same sense of responsibility, family honor, and high self-expectations that made them great friends and sometimes difficult lovers.

So different, and yet so alike. They really were family, weren’t they?
“How does it feel to see them coming to life?” asked Elise.

“Fantastic.” Alison shut the door of the hovercraft behind her and leaned against it, looking up at the two houses. “I can’t believe how much has changed all of a sudden. It was like that with my house, too—weeks and weeks and weeks of what looked like nothing at all, and then boom, it seemed like two months of work got done in five days.”

A dragonfly flitted in front of her, distracting her with its blue glitter as it zigged, zagged and darted off again. A moment later it returned, hovering nearly in front of her face before suddenly swooping up and over her head.

“I think that’s good luck,” said Elise. “Now, if it had landed on you, we’d be counting on some very good luck.”

Alison turned, shading her eyes against the late afternoon sun as she looked into Elise’s smiling face. “I don’t think I need any more good luck. I have all I can handle right here.”

Elise stepped closer and nuzzled her throat. “Mmm. You, sun, warm skin...I love this combination. And you smell wonderful.”

“So do you.” Alison lifted her chin, giving Elise all the access she wanted. When they’d first gotten together, she’d known Elise was tactile. Just how tactile had been a pleasant surprise, and she loved being the
object of so much physical affection. Funny how she’d never known how much she craved that. Now she had no idea how she could live without it.

Elise planted a final kiss on her throat and straightened. “So, shall we go have a look?”

“Which one first?”

“Lynne and Kathryn’s,” Elise decided. “I want to see the fireplace. Lynne said it turned out beautifully.”

“God, I hope so. I think she cares more about that than any other part of this house. I swear, I slaved over this design and she hardly even noticed the rest of it.”

“That’s not true and you know it. If she hadn’t noticed the rest you wouldn’t have had to change the window design in the living room three times.”

Alison laughed. “Good point, though to be fair I think one of those times was actually because of Kathryn. At least we got it settled before construction began. Barely.”

They crunched across the gravel of the landing pad and picked their way through the mounds of dirt around the base of the house. The stairs and wide front porch had been finished since their last visit, and after checking it over they both leaned on the front railing and looked out at the view.

“You were right,” said Elise. “It’s the perfect height for us.” She indicated their forearms on the railing. “Which means the side railings must be the perfect height for Lynne.”

Alison looked at the higher railings on each side of the porch, smiling at the way this little design touch had blended so well. “That’s one of those things I’d never have thought of on my own. But Lynne’s pretty aware of things like that.”

“ Comes from living a lifetime a head higher than the rest of us.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, looking out over the lake and listening to the buzz of insects. This valley was one of the loveliest places Alison had ever seen, and though she adored her own house, there were times when she came over here and felt just a little bit envious. Lynne and Kathryn were going to be able to come home on a summer afternoon like this one, make dinner, and sit here to eat it while the sun set behind the mountains and evening fell over the lake. Incredible.
Then again, she could hardly think of two people who deserved it more. Unless, of course, it was the other residents of the valley. In the process of helping Seven and Revi with their own design, she’d learned a great deal more about their personal histories. There were times when she wondered how they could possibly have survived…and times when she saw glimpses of ways in which they hadn’t. Both of those women were missing parts of their lives they could never recover. But they had changed a great deal in the last five months, Revi in particular. Alison had formed a special friendship with her, which she dated back to the day of Voyager’s last flight—and the moment when Revi had dragged Commander Chakotay over to apologize to Elise. Defending or protecting Elise was a sure way into Alison’s good graces.

Elise tapped her sandal against the lower railing. “Shall we?”

“Mm hm.” Alison turned toward the house. “Oh, look, they put in the door molding!”

“That’s a huge improvement.”

“It’s always the smallest bits at the end that make the biggest difference.” Alison admired the molding for a moment before punching in the key code. The door opened onto a spacious slate-floored mudroom, a practical feature that Lynne had insisted on. She’d wanted more than just a hallway; she’d wanted an entire room to deal with wet coats and snowy or muddy boots, and of course to store her skis and climbing gear. She and Alison had designed the room with a decorative drain running the length of the wall by the entrance, where the coat hooks and shoe benches would go. Cupboards and shelves designed specifically for her gear lined the other walls, allowing her to store everything she needed while maintaining a classy appearance. The warm tones of the wood combined with the slate flooring had made this one of Alison’s favorite places in the house. Funny, that. She’d never expected to like the mudroom.

“I want this in my house,” said Elise. “I don’t know why every house doesn’t have one. Why do we all stumble around in our foyers and hallways, lining up boots by the door, when we could have something like this?”

“Because most of us think in terms of appearance instead of practicality.”

“True. And God knows Lynne’s all about practicality. It’s probably a good thing she married a Starfleet captain.”
“Soon to be an admiral,” Alison reminded her, leading the way through the arched doorway into the living area.

Elise smiled. “I wonder how the celebration is going?”

“I just hope the weather holds for them. Oh, look at it!” Alison stopped in delight. “It’s gorgeous!”

“It is. They did a fantastic job.” Elise put an arm around her waist as they admired the newly completed fireplace. Though the actual opening for the stove insert was a standard size, the rounded river rocks that made up the fireplace, hearth and chimney extended all the way to the ceiling, making it the central focus of the entire first floor.

“I have such great memories of finding these,” said Alison. It had been a day-long project, with all six of them spreading over the area around Lynne’s old home. The original foundation rocks had been easy, but the rocks from the main part of the fireplace and chimney could have fallen and rolled anywhere. Once they’d found the first few, buried surprisingly deep, Seven had calculated a dispersal pattern, marked the area, and dispatched them all with tricorders and shovels. Damn if she hadn’t been exactly right about where those rocks would be.

“Me too,” said Elise. “I think that’s the day Lynne made me part of the family.”

“No, it’s not. She made you part of the family when she hugged you on the Independence. I saw it in her eyes then.” Alison leaned in and kissed her cheek. “That was when she realized that you’re just as stubborn and hard on yourself as she is.”

“Hamilton family trait,” said Elise lightly. A little too lightly, and Alison paid closer attention.

“You saw your mother today,” she guessed.

“How do you always know that?”

“Because you’re always just a bit…off, after you see her.”

Elise walked across the room and crouched down, running her fingertips over the smooth stones of the hearth. “She thinks my relationship with Lynne is based on spite.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“I know. It’s just hard. I want her to give me a little more credit. I’m not trying to punish her, for God’s sake!”

“Honey…” Alison walked over and sat on the cool stones, reaching for Elise’s hand. “You may not be able to convince her on this one. She
invested everything into getting rid of Lynne, and she lost her bet. Along with her freedom, and now she feels like she’s losing you. If she allows herself to believe that Lynne really is worthy of your affection, then she has to let go of everything that drove her to that point. And she would have to accept the fact that her choices could have killed you. She may simply have too much emotionally invested to let that happen.”

A familiar grief shadowed Elise’s eyes. “There is such a thing as too much Hamilton stubbornness. If she would just let go, we could work through this and be a family again. Or at least a semblance of one.”

“I know how much you want that,” Alison said softly. “And I really hope it happens for you.”

“But you don’t think it will.”

“I don’t think you should count on it.”

“Right.” Elise sat on the floor, draping her arms over her upraised knees. “That’s what I thought you’d say.”

Alison sighed. “I just hate seeing you repeatedly set yourself up for disappointment. It hurts me every time you come crashing down again.”

“That’s okay,” said Elise with false cheer, “it hurts me even worse.” She dropped the attitude and shook her head. “I don’t know how not to hope. Honestly, I wish I could be a little more cynical when it comes to this.”

Alison instantly felt like a clod. A cynical one. “If it sounds like I’m telling you not to hope, then I’m sorry. That would be a terrible message from me, especially since that’s one of the things I love most about you.”

“What, that I keep banging my head against the exact same brick wall?”

“No. That you keep expecting the best of people.”

Elise smiled then. “Sometimes it works. I found it in you.”

“Yes, and it’s been a hell of a burden. Now I’m always trying to live up to my own best ideals. It’s exhausting, I tell you.”

The humor was having its desired effect, to her relief. She really couldn’t bear it when Elise was down like this, and she was usually down every time she saw her mother. Alison wished she would simply stop visiting, but of course that would never happen. Elise could no more cut off her mother than she could cut out her own heart, and Melanie Hamilton knew it. Sometimes Alison truly hated that woman for the
damage she’d done and was continuing to do, but in her more charitable moments, she could understand that Melanie was holding on to the one thing that mattered most to her. After all, it was the one thing that mattered most to Alison, too.

Elise was looking at her with a much brighter sparkle in her eye. “You don’t look all that exhausted to me.”

“Boardroom face. I’m very good at hiding it.”

“Yes you are, in the boardroom. But not with me.”

“No. I don’t hide anything with you.” She saw that register with all the impact she’d intended.

“I do love you,” Elise said quietly.

“I know. I feel it every time you look at me like that.” Alison shifted off the hearth and knelt on all fours, meeting Elise in a soft, very sweet kiss.

“And I love you too,” she whispered.

Elise lifted a hand, gently tracing the planes of her face. “You know, you’re only one rung below Lynne on Mom’s shit list. She’s figured out that I’m serious about you. For all her talk about me settling down and starting a family, I don’t think she ever really prepared herself for it happening. She’s not pleased to lose my exclusive attention.”

“She’d better get used to it. Her job is done. She raised you and now she needs to let you go.” Alison sat back on her heels, caught Elise’s hand, and placed it on the center of her chest. “My job is just beginning, though.”

“I hope you don’t see it as a job. Your pay is terrible.”

“I take it out in trade. And I happen to consider it a fantastic bargain.” Alison lifted Elise’s hand, kissed the back of it, then clasped their fingers together. “Which reminds me. I have something important to ask you, and for some odd reason, it seems appropriate to ask you here.”

Elise’s brows drew together. “All right. You’ve got me curious.”

Alison took a deep breath. She’d been wanting to ask this for, oh, five months now—and every time she talked herself out of it. But it was starting to make very little sense to go on the way they were.

“Will you live with me?” she asked. “I know it’s not fair to ask you to give up your house, but you always seem so happy in mine that I’m hoping it won’t be too big an adjustment for you. And I’m getting tired of dividing our time and our wardrobes, and I miss you so damn much when
we’re not together… I’ve been trying not to put any pressure on you because you’ve had such a hard time these last few months, and I—” She stopped, her heart sinking at the way Elise was shaking her head. “I mean, we don’t have to do it now,” she hastened to add. “We could do it later. I just want you to know that the invitation is there, and…” Her voice trailed off as the smile spread across Elise’s face.

“I would love to,” Elise said simply.

“You would?”

“I would.”

“Then why were you shaking your head?”

“Because you were so cute the way you were trying to sell it to me. I don’t need to be sold on the idea, Alison. I’d have moved in with you the day after Voyager’s last flight if you’d asked. Of course, it would have been a colossal mistake; I haven’t been the easiest person to live with since Mom’s arrest. But I’d have done it anyway and damn the consequences. There’s something about seeing death pass so closely that puts things in perspective. I’ve known since then that I would spend my life with you if you’d let me. So—” She gave an elegant shrug, the gesture completely at odds with her glorious smile. “I’m glad that maybe you’ll let me.”

Alison’s spine slumped. “You’d have moved in with me five months ago? Jesus Christ. I’ve been wanting to ask you for five months. I thought it was ridiculous. I thought I’d send you running in the opposite direction.”

Elise chuckled. “I guess we’ve always been on the same page, even when we didn’t know it.”

The reality began trickling through Alison’s nerves. “You’ll live with me?”

“I’m just going to sit here until your brain processes that. I’m sure it won’t take long.” Elise looked so beautiful, and so happy in her acceptance, that Alison’s heart threatened to implode right there in her chest.

“You’re right, it won’t take long.” She pushed herself onto all fours and bumped purposefully into Elise, knocking her onto her back and immediately straddling her. “I love you,” she said fervently, and promptly stopped her from answering. It was such a sweet moment that it took the more socially-oriented part of her brain several minutes to get her attention and point out that perhaps it really wasn’t appropriate to be making
out with her partner on Lynne and Kathryn’s new hardwood floor. Pulling away, she dropped a final kiss and raised her head. “Maybe we should take this somewhere else.”

“You think?” Elise smiled up at her. “I’m way past the stage of rolling around on a hard floor. Come to think of it, I never went through that stage.”

Alison dismounted, allowing Elise to sit up. “I was referring to the fact that this particular floor isn’t ours.”

“Oh.” She laughed. “Kathryn would be rather dismayed at the idea. But Lynne would just find it amusing.”

“Let’s not find out. Come on, I want to see if they finished the bedroom window seat, and then I want to take you home. Our home.” Alison felt a happy little buzz just saying the words.

“You’re in a hurry. Didn’t you want to check out the progress on Seven and Revi’s house first?”

Actually, Alison had been so overwhelmed by Elise’s easy acceptance that she’d almost forgotten there even was a second house in the valley. Just as she opened her mouth to respond, Elise raised a hand.

“Listen. I think we have company.”

Alison heard it then, the quiet hum of a hovercraft engine. They rose and went out to the front porch, watching as the craft settled on the landing pad next to their own. Revi was out of the passenger side almost before Seven had powered down the engines. “There they are again!” she called. “Seven, I’m telling you, we need to post no trespassing signs. The riff raff are here practically every day.”

Delighted to see her friend, Alison trotted down the steps and met her halfway for a hug. “Welcome back! God, it’s good to see you. How was Venice?”

“Wonderful. The food was fantastic, the weather was great, and Seven’s mind was thoroughly blown by the entire concept.”

Seven came around to offer her own hug, while Elise embraced Revi and then turned into Seven’s arms. “What concept?” she asked Seven. “A city underwater?”

“No, a city underwater that wasn’t designed to be underwater. I still have difficulty understanding the Human penchant for living in places that are so clearly inhospitable to their needs.” Seven smiled, something that
she did more and more these days. “However, I agree with Revi. It was a wonderful visit.”

“It must have been,” said Alison. “You two look tanned and relaxed.” Actually they looked amazing. Seven in shorts and a tank top was a sight to send the most staid heart flitting, even more so because of her utter disregard for how anyone might view the implants laid bare by her choice of clothing. The first time Alison had seen them, she’d been hard pressed not to stare rudely. Now they just seemed exotic and rather sensual, completely appropriate to the woman who wore them so easily. Lynne wore hers almost as easily, though Alison now understood just how difficult a road that had been for her.

But for Revi, who had always worn long sleeves over her Borg arm—to see her in a tank top was nothing short of shocking. Alison ran her fingers down the arm, a liberty she’d earned after one very long and very difficult conversation the previous month. “Finally give up hiding?” she asked.

“It was hot in Venice. I didn’t feel like covering up.”

“You are so full of shit.” Alison loved the smile that was gracing Revi’s face. “You actually did this in Venice?” At the nod, she promptly hugged her again. “Good for you! Damn, Revi. Counselor Troi is going to be so proud of you.”

It wasn’t that Revi was ashamed of how she looked. That was a road she’d never had to travel, unlike Lynne. What she was ashamed of was what she’d been forced to do, and her Borg arm was vivid, unsparing evidence of it. It was also a head-turner, attracting attention in a way that her ocular implant never did. She lived with the expectation of being questioned and judged about just what she’d done with that arm, so she kept it covered most of the time. Alison had asked the obvious—why she didn’t replace it with a more natural prosthetic, like the one she’d designed for Lynne—and learned a great deal about the built-in tools the arm contained. The muscle regenerator she’d used on Elise was only one of more than half a dozen complex medical tools it provided, and as long as Revi was going to remain in the medical profession, such an advantage was one she was loathe to give up. As she’d said to Alison, she had already saved a life with it once. If the time ever came when she needed it, but didn’t have it, and someone died as a result—well, Alison understood Revi well enough by now to know she’d have a hard time recovering from that scenario.
Which was why Counselor Troi had been working with her to focus on the positive aspects of her arm, while acknowledging and putting away the negative associations. It was a microcosm of her entire Borg experience, and what she could apply to the arm, she could apply to all of it. For Revi to cast aside her own self-judgment and bare that arm to the world—especially in a crowded city like Venice—was a spectacular leap.

“She already called Counselor Troi on the Enterprise,” said Seven with visible pride. “After we returned from our first day of walking through the city. Revi went uncovered from the time we left in the morning until we came back to our room that night.”

“And did anyone say anything? Was anyone rude?” asked Elise.

“Oh, yes,” said Revi. “Lots of staring. A few comments. But the funny thing is—and this is something I never thought about—most civilians don’t recognize this as Borg. This isn’t the Delta Quadrant; people don’t have instant recognition of all things Borg. And I just never considered that. Unless a person is familiar with Borg technology, this just looks like a rather horrifying prosthetic. I think more people pitied me than anything else.”

“That’s ironic,” Alison said, and Revi nodded.

“Isn’t it? And when I talked to Counselor Troi she just got one of those little knowing smiles. I said, ‘You knew this would happen, didn’t you?’ and she said yes, but it wouldn’t have done any good to tell me. I had to learn it on my own. She also said that the reactions of others had never been the point; the point was me feeling enough at ease with myself to risk those reactions. That woman is insufferable sometimes,” she added.

“Because she’s usually right?” asked Seven with an arch look.

“Exactly.”

“You must find me very difficult to live with, then.”

Alison and Elise laughed, while Revi held up her arm menacingly. “Don’t make me zap you.”

“Zap me and you’ll be testing the water temperature in that lake. With your entire body.”

“You two already sound like an old married couple,” said Elise. “Hard to believe it’s only been a week since the wedding.”

“A wonderful week,” said Seven. “I’m so glad Revi ceased resisting.”

“I wasn’t resisting.” Revi rolled her eyes. “You make it sound like you
dragged me to the altar. I was just keeping to our original agreement. But it did make more sense to get married while we were still on leave.”

“Well, we want to hear all about the honeymoon,” said Elise. Alison nodded. “You definitely need to come to dinner after you get settled in.”

“We would enjoy that,” said Seven. “Your house?”

“Our house,” said Alison, wrapping an arm around Elise’s waist. “I just asked Elise to move in, and she agreed. You’re the first to know.”

“Well, congratulations!” said Revi with a bright smile. “Does this mean you’re engaged?” asked Seven.

Alison cleared her throat delicately. “No, this is just the first step.”

Seven frowned. “Revi and I were engaged for six months before we moved in together. Kathryn and Lynne were engaged before cohabiting, and so were B’Elanna and Tom, and Harry and Celes. Is this not the normal pattern for a relationship?”

“Ah, not necessarily. Sometimes people live together first to decide whether or not they’re compatible.” Alison was finding this conversation awkward in the extreme, and Revi was giving her no help at all as she stood there, arms crossed over her chest and a wide grin on her face.

“But is that not the purpose of engagement? To offer a commitment period that enables both parties to determine whether they wish to proceed into the marriage?”

“You’re exactly right, Seven,” said Elise. “But I think Alison already used up her store of courage asking me to move in.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Alison. “I didn’t hear you asking me anything.”

“Well, that’s true. So, will you marry me?” Elise’s tone was so normal that it took Alison several seconds to comprehend what she’d said.

“What?” It was an instinctive stall for time, since she was too shocked to answer. Revi and Seven were now watching with extreme interest, and Alison felt as if she’d been abruptly dropped into a surreal alternate world.

Elise turned, clasping both of her hands and holding them as she looked into her eyes. “I suppose I could have planned this better. I don’t have a ring, and I always envisioned this moment involving a romantic dinner with candlelight, and both of us dressed to knock each other’s eyes out, but...suddenly it seems to be the right time. Alison, I told you the very first night we spent together that you had my heart. In five months
that hasn’t changed, except to get stronger and deeper. Seven’s right, moving in with you is essentially an engagement. If it didn’t feel that way to me, I wouldn’t do it. So why not make it official?” She squeezed Alison’s hands, her gray eyes glowing in the late afternoon sun as she added, “I love you. I’d like to announce that to the world, if you’ll let me.”

Alison still had no voice. She had rarely in her life been shocked speechless, but Elise had managed it. And while she stood there, trying to get her frozen brain working again, Elise’s smile slipped and she let go of Alison’s hands. “On the other hand, maybe it’s too—”

With a quick lunge, Alison recaptured her hands. Seeing the light go out of Elise’s face had focused her like nothing else could. “Yes,” she said clearly. “I’ll marry you.”

The transformation swept over Elise’s features. “You will?”

Alison was sure of herself now. “I will. You just got a little ahead of me, that’s all. It took me a few seconds to catch up.”

With a brilliant smile, Elise stepped into her arms, seeking her out for what soon turned into a rather passionate kiss. And while they were wrapped up in each other, Alison heard a chuckle.

“Good job, Seven,” said Revi. “You got us here just in time.”

“THREE WORDS, Admiral. We’d be delighted.”

Kathryn felt the smile split her face as she watched Lynne working on the last pitch. “B’Elanna, that’s fantastic news! You’ve just made my whole week. Maybe my month. Except I’m not an admiral yet.”

“Details. You will be in a week. I’m going to have to practice calling you that, or I’ll be making embarrassing mistakes in public.”

“Well, for that matter, I’m going to have to practice too. Every time someone says ‘Admiral Janeway’ I’ll be looking around for my father.”

“I think he’d be very proud of you.”

“I think he would be, too.” Kathryn took a moment to bask in the thought. “And he’d be envious of my job. He never had the kind of fun I’m going to have. I can’t believe how well this has turned out.”

“Tom and I are thrilled. The only reason we didn’t get back to you sooner is that we didn’t get the message until now. It took us all of twelve seconds to discuss it and come to an agreement.”
“Twelve? I’m insulted. I made you such a great offer that it should only have taken nine. Speaking of which, if you’re going to call me Admiral, then I should be calling you Lieutenant Commander.”

B’Elanna laughed. “That’s taking a little getting used to as well. Though it is fun to outrank Tom again.”

“He’ll get there. Especially with this job.” Kathryn was glowing with happiness—B’Elanna’s call had made this a clean sweep. “Do you know, I’m still pinching myself. Harry’s on board, Seven, Barclay, Tuvok, now you and Tom…it’ll almost be like senior staff meetings on Voyager.”

“I’ll miss Chakotay, though.”

“We couldn’t drag him away from the Academy with a shuttle tied to each leg.” Privately Kathryn was relieved that Chakotay’s desires had led him to a teaching position at the Academy. It kept him far out of the community she’d be working in, and the impending crash of his relationship with Phoebe would not affect their professional relationship. And the crash was coming soon; she could see it. Phoebe was starting to realize that Chakotay was not entirely content with who she was, and their arguments were getting more and more common. Kathryn hoped she’d never figure out exactly why Chakotay wasn’t happy. Ironically, the situation had drawn her and Phoebe closer together, as her own protective feelings came swarming up to the surface. Phoebe could be a pain in the ass, but by god she deserved to be loved for herself.

“True. He always said he wanted to teach. And I think he’ll be good at it. So you got Seven to agree? Did she have to accept a commission?”

“No, thank god, because Seven in the actual chain of command is just not a good idea. She’ll be a private consultant. Which means you can’t give her orders.”

“As if I would ever presume.”

They both laughed, remembering many times when B’Elanna had made just that presumption—none of which had turned out all that well. Kathryn saw Lynne rappelling down and said, “B’Elanna, I’m so glad you called, but we’re going to have to pick this up later. Lynne’s on her way down and I’m about to haul myself up an eighty-degree pitch.”

“Where are you?”

“Well…do you remember creating a very special holodeck program for Lynne? When she proposed to me?”

A pause. Then: “You’re on the mountain?!”
“We’re on the mountain.” Kathryn watched Lynne with a growing warmth in her stomach.

“So she finally got you there. That’s fantastic. Do you have a single muscle in your body that doesn’t hurt?”

“No.”

B’Elanna laughed again. “Yeah, that’s what happened to me on Tsia. That woman feels no pain. And that was before she had Borg implants in her legs. I can only imagine how she is now. My condolences.”

“Oh, they’re not needed. I’ve been training for months. And yes, I’m sore, but it’s worth it. I’d climb a mountain every day to see Lynne like this.”

With a thump, Lynne landed beside her and unclipped her harness from the rope. Kathryn held up a hand and indicated her commbadge.

“I remember that. When we were on top of that mountain on Tsia, she was…I think giddy might be the word. Almost delirious with happiness. She was shouting and spinning in circles and I remember thinking that it shouldn’t have been me up there seeing her like that, it should have been you.”

Lynne smiled and mouthed the words, “I remember.”

“I know exactly what you’re talking about,” Kathryn said. “I saw her do that on Bliss, during our honeymoon. I’m not sure she’ll be doing it today, though.”

“Why not?”

“Because this time is different,” said Lynne into Kathryn’s commbadge.

“Lynne! Have you been there all this time?”

“Just arrived. It’s good to hear your voice. Were you calling to accept Kathryn’s offer?”

“That’s exactly why I was calling.”

“Great! That’s it, then—Kathryn’s just put together the best team in Ship Design history. Starfleet had better look out.”

“We’re going to have fun, Fossil. Too bad you won’t be there with us.”

“I’ve got my own job. You brainiacs can change the face of Starfleet; I’m going to be busy teaching kids to climb mountains.”

“I’m really happy for you. I know that’s your first love.”

“First and last. Well, not counting Kathryn, of course.”

“Good thing you said that,” muttered Kathryn with a mock frown.
“So I guess I’d better let you go. Kathryn says you’re about to go up an eighty-degree pitch?”

“Yeah. Final technical pitch, and after that we just walk up to the summit.”

“Well, have a great time. I wish I could be there to see your summit dance.”

“No dance today, B’Elanna. We’re here to say goodbye to someone.”

“Oh. Shit, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. This is how it has to be. And…I’m ready for it.”

“I still wish I could be there to give you a hug.”

“You just did.” Lynne smiled, even though B’Elanna couldn’t see it.

“Okay. Well…goodbye, then. And stay safe.”

“We will,” said Kathryn. She signed off and looked up at her wife.

“Shall we finish it?”

“After you.” Lynne stepped aside and swept an arm toward the line she’d just set. As Kathryn clipped on, she added, “Congratulations! How does it feel to have the dream team locked in?”

“Feels pretty damned good.” Kathryn found the first handholds, wedged her foot in a small crack, and pushed up. “And by the way, you have two jobs, not one. Don’t forget the little detail about guiding one of the biggest foundations in the quadrant.”

“As if I could. Okay, do you see that ledge about halfway up? On the right?”

Kathryn craned her neck back. “Yes.”

“That’s where I want you to take a break. I’ll come up after you.”

“All right. I’ll see you there.”

In the last few months, Kathryn had learned a great deal about Lynne’s world. She’d thought herself a fairly accomplished athlete and very well-versed in survival techniques, but Lynne was in a different class altogether. Really, her wife should be at the Academy teaching survival courses. There was simply no one Kathryn would trust more if she ever found herself lost in the wilderness, and there was no one she trusted more on this mountain.

Lynne was a stickler for safety, refusing to allow both of them to be on a vertical pitch at the same time. She would not climb up until Kathryn had stepped off the route and removed all possibility of dislodging a rock. Though Kathryn had never questioned this precaution, she’d already seen the necessity for it on one of their earlier training climbs this summer.
Her foot had slipped as a head-sized rock pulled away from the wall, tumbling and bouncing down as she watched. Had Lynne been directly below her, their training climb would likely have ended in an emergency beam out. As it was, Lynne—who had been standing on a small rocky apron at the base of the pitch—simply stepped aside and let the rock go past her.

Step by step, handhold by handhold, she pulled herself up the rock face. A little thrill of anticipation zinged through her at the knowledge that their goal was so close. In between their travels, the house design, Lynne’s work at the Foundation, and everything else they’d had to keep them busy, they had managed to spend a significant amount of time training for this. Well, Kathryn had trained; Lynne had simply enjoyed being out with her. And now all of that work was paying off. She was no longer limited to walkup mountains, which opened up a wide part of Lynne’s world to her.

Including this mountain in the Canada Rockies. The place that she had known only as a holodeck program, but which held more significance for her than any other point on Earth. This was where she had promised to bring Lynne’s remains, when they had both known she was dying. And it was where they were bringing the remains of Lynne’s past.

She reached the ledge more quickly than she had expected, then stepped aside and waited as Lynne came up to join her. It was always a pleasure to watch her climb; she had a grace that Kathryn knew she would never acquire, no matter how much time she spent practicing. It was simply innate. Lynne truly did have mountains in her blood, and these last few months had transformed her into a woman that Kathryn had only glimpsed twice before—once during their honeymoon on Bliss, and again at the ski resort before the assassination attempt. She was confident, relaxed, open and vibrantly happy, and Kathryn now understood exactly how much Lynne had given up to stay on board Voyager with her. It wasn’t just her family she had lost. She had also left behind the one thing that brought her real, soul-deep joy. Though she had made every effort, Lynne had never been truly happy in space. Not the way she was here. Nor could Kathryn forget the ultimate price Lynne had paid, in her gradual acceptance of killing and death as a part of her life. Gohat’s suicide had been a wake-up call. She did not want to expose Lynne to any more situations in which she would be forced to make such a terrible choice.
Which was why, when Admiral Necheyev had asked for her decision on whether she wanted her own ship again, she’d said no. It had been easier than she’d imagined. In fact, the hardest part about it had been convincing Lynne. At first she’d tried to keep half her reasoning to herself, but Lynne had sensed she wasn’t getting the whole picture. When Kathryn had admitted the other reasons, Lynne had predictably tried to talk her out of it. They’d argued for days, until Kathryn pulled a few strings and had them both transported directly to the base of Denali. She had pointed at the huge mountain, its top shrouded in clouds, and said, “That is why we need to stay. You told me once that you had unfinished business with this mountain. What you didn’t tell me was that you have unfinished business with all of them. You will never be happy in space and I will never be happy knowing that you’re not really alive. I know the difference now, Lynne. I’ve seen you truly alive. I can’t go back to the way it was before. Maybe you can, but I can’t.”

Lynne had stared at the mountain, then at her, and finally nodded. She had resigned her Starfleet contract the very next day.

A scraping sound brought her back to the present, and she watched Lynne pull herself onto the ledge. “Almost there,” Lynne said. “The last part is easier than what you’ve already done. We’ll be on top in less than ten minutes.” She gave Kathryn a questioning look. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Just admiring your technique,” said Kathryn. For the life of her, she couldn’t get the smile off her face. “You’re so beautiful when you climb.”

Lynne ducked her head. “Okay, now I’m going to be completely self-conscious on that line.”

Kathryn laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re getting shy on me now. Not after a year and a half of marriage. Besides, I know for a fact you’ve had other climbing partners admiring your...form.”

“We’re not talking about the same thing here, are we?” Lynne gave her a knowing grin. “Sure I’ve had other partners admiring my form. Most of whom were guys who thought it would be a great idea if I climbed naked.”

“Well, it’s not a bad idea...”

“You’re such a dog.”

“If I weren’t, you’d be crushed.”

With a chuckle, Lynne said, “It’s true I’ve gotten used to it. You’ve
always been good for my self-esteem. But I’m not climbing naked for your benefit, sorry. Too many tender parts to get scraped.”

“That’s okay, I’ve got a good imagination. And a good memory.” She indicated the line. “How about you go first this time?”

Lynne raised an eyebrow. “So you can watch my ass?”

“Well, it would be a change of pace.” Kathryn shrugged. “I’ve spent the last ten minutes looking down your neckline and thanking the gods for v-neck tank tops.”

Lynne’s open laughter echoed off the cliff walls. “You have no shame. Next time I’m wearing a turtleneck.”

“Now that would be a damned waste of a fine pair of—” She was interrupted by the soft lips closing on her own, but still managed to complete her sentence with a physical illustration. Lynne chuckled, kissed her again, then drew back and looked at her with a smile.

“Have I mentioned that you’re my favorite climbing partner in the whole world?”

“At the moment I’m your only climbing partner in the whole world.”

“No, Kathryn—I’m serious.” The smile was gone now, replaced by an intent look. “Remember when I told you about my hike outside Boulder, when I was deciding whether to stay on Earth?”

“I remember.” As if she could ever forget that conversation.

“I told you then that I’d realized I could climb every mountain in the world and it wouldn’t mean anything if I didn’t have you to come home to. What I never guessed was how much it would mean to climb those mountains with you, instead of coming home and telling you about it. Kathryn, this—” she indicated the rock wall at their side— “this is something I fantasized about. I never imagined it would actually happen. But you’ve worked so hard, and learned so much...I don’t even know how to explain it, but having you here, sharing a rope with you—it’s literally a dream come true. My two greatest loves at the same time, and it’s not a shore leave that’s going to end tomorrow. It’s something we can do on weekends now, or whenever you schedule leave. I don’t know how it’s possible to be any happier.”

Kathryn reached up to touch her jawline, basking in the glow that Lynne was radiating. “I don’t think it is,” she said. “I’ve never been happier, either. I have absolutely everything I could ever want in my life.”

“Are you sure?”
“I’m positive.” She dropped her hand to clasp Lynne’s. “I loved commanding a starship, but I honestly think I’ll be happier in Ship Design than on the bridge of a Galaxy or Sovereign class ship. When you start getting up in that class of ship, you start being less of a captain and more of a bureaucrat with a really nice office. A nice office that occasionally finds itself in very dangerous situations, and sweetheart, I’m done with that part of my life. I’ve come too close to losing you too many times. Even my luck was bound to run out someday. I’m quitting while I’m ahead, and now I get to spend my days doing something that seems awfully close to playing. And when I’m done with a day of playing, I’ll come home at a normal time, and crawl in bed with you, and know that the only thing that will wake me up will be my alarm, not a call from the bridge. This is a dream job, and I’ve managed to take almost my entire senior staff with me. So yes, I’m positive that I have everything I want.”

“Okay,” said Lynne quietly. “I just had to ask one more time.”

“I know. You can ask as many times as you need to. My answer will be the same. I’m not giving anything up.”

“That’s not true. But…I accept that what you’re giving up is not the most important thing to you.”

“Not by a long shot.”

They looked at each other for several seconds, until Lynne smiled and tilted her head toward the rope. “Ready?”

“I’m ready.”

The second half of the pitch was indeed easier than the first, and before long they were both standing upright again on a wide, gentle slope just below the summit. From here it was just a stroll. While Lynne pulled up the rope and coiled it, Kathryn stepped just out of her hearing range, tapped her commbadge, and said quietly, “Janeway to Comida One. We’re here.”

“Right on time!” said a cheery voice. “I’m beaming it down now. Bon appetit.”

She smiled. “Thank you. Janeway out.”

Lynne hadn’t noticed anything as she stuffed the rope in her pack and swung it onto her shoulders. “Okay! Let’s go see the view.” She turned right, leading Kathryn straight across to a point where a natural path appeared on the boulder-strewn summit. The path was bare rock, almost as smooth as if it were artificial, and Kathryn stopped in her tracks.
“Oh, my god. This is it.”

Lynne nodded silently, and Kathryn was swept back to the memory of the first time she’d seen this place. Lynne had sent her an invitation to Holodeck One, asking her to wear something formal. Kathryn had arrived in a dress and low heels, startled to see the holodeck doors open onto this very path. She’d wondered at the time how Lynne expected her to walk on rocks in heels, but the path had been easy, winding up a slight incline and vanishing behind a large free-standing boulder. Though she hadn’t known it then, behind that boulder stood a formal dinner for two, and a proposal of marriage.

She followed the path with her eyes, recognizing every curve, feeling her throat tighten at the sight of the boulder. This was their mountain, but this time it wasn’t a program. The breeze in her face, the impossibly dark blue sky overhead, the heat reflecting off the rocks—it was all real. She couldn’t wait to get around that boulder and see the view, but at the same time part of her never wanted to move from this spot. One of the greatest fantasies of her life lay ahead of her, and she wanted to taste the anticipation just a little longer.

Lynne put an arm around her waist. “I think I might cry.”

“If you do, I’ll be right there with you. Oh, sweetheart, I can’t believe we’re here.”

“I can’t either.” Lynne’s voice sounded tight. “How many times did I dream about this...”

“We both did.” For just a moment Kathryn thought about the promise she’d made to Lynne on Terellia, and how close she’d come to standing here alone. She really didn’t think she could have survived it.

Pushing the memory from her mind, she stepped onto the familiar path. Slowly they walked toward the boulder, both of them reaching out to touch it as they went past, and then they were there.

It was glorious. One of the things Lynne had said she’d loved about this mountain was that it kept its secrets for the very end. Not until you reached the absolute summit did the view open up, and now here they were, looking into the face of a vast, icy range of mountains that stretched back as far as the eye could see. Though the summer heat had melted most of the snowpack, the peaks were still covered, and glaciers were visible in some of the shaded valleys. The combination of dark rock,
blazing white snow and the azure of high-elevation sky was simply breathtaking.

And on a small patch of flat ground just ahead, a table for two stood incongruously, its white tablecloth rippling in the breeze but held firmly down by several stasis containers.

“What the hell?” asked Lynne. A broad smile broke across her face. “I think someone’s been messing with the environment here. I distinctly recall a bare summit last time I was on this mountain.”

“Not the last time I was on it.” Kathryn took her hand. “You brought me here for a lovely anniversary dinner, as I recall. I thought it was time for me to return the favor.”

“Kathryn…god, this is wonderful.” Lynne turned and crushed her in a hug, made a little awkward by their packs. “I can’t believe it. How did you manage it?”

Kathryn couldn’t help feeling pleased with herself. “I found a caterer specializing in wilderness dining. They fly an orbital cargo craft over wherever you want to be, and beam the entire setup down to prearranged coordinates. When we’re done here, we’ll call them again and they’ll beam it up, along with us. So I cancelled the shuttle service you ordered and set this up instead.”

“You are a queen among women. Incredible. This is a lot better than the food I packed.”

“Tell me about it,” grumbled Kathryn, smiling as Lynne laughed.

The meal was excellent, made even better by their hunger and the fresh air, and they happily worked their way through four courses. Kathryn had even thought to send their caterer the program for Lynne’s special gin and tonics, to her wife’s obvious glee. When they had at last eaten all they could, they scooted their chairs together and sat with drinks in hand, simply looking at the view and enjoying each other’s presence. The late afternoon light was warm and soft, taking the harshness out of the snowy peaks and giving the scene a quiet majesty that Kathryn knew she would never forget.

At last Lynne set her glass down, rose from her chair and walked to the pack she’d left on the ground. Kathryn waited, a tiny bit of dread curling in her stomach. This was the moment their climb had been about. She was glad Lynne was finally doing it, but—it was going to be hard.
Lynne returned with a small PADD in her hand. She picked up her glass, took a large swallow, and silently activated the file.

“Hello, Lynne.” Elizabeth Hamilton looked out of the small screen at them, her hair now snowy white and her face bearing the lines of her many years. She looked tired and much smaller than she had in the previous year’s recording, as if she had suddenly aged a great deal. “It’s July 24, 2026. Twenty-five years since you’ve been gone, and I have never been more glad that you left.”

Kathryn glanced at Lynne’s hand, saw the trembling, and gently removed the glass from her grip.

“I debated about whether to tell you the truth,” Elizabeth continued. “Part of me thinks you’d be better off not knowing. But I raised you never to lie, and I can’t lie to you now, even though I know this will be hard for you to hear.” She took a deep breath. “John’s gone. I know you’ve been expecting it; his health wasn’t good these last couple of years. We’ve both lived longer than we expected, and frankly, we’ve lived longer than we should have. This is not the world I envisioned you inheriting when you were a little girl. And I never truly believed that there would be a third world war. But I was wrong. It started this year.

“The bombs have been falling everywhere. Millions are already dead. John saw it coming. Ironically, your investment advice gave him the best evidence of all. He sat me down last year and warned me about it—told me that the companies you had him investing in were the type to make big profits off a war situation, and that’s what he saw all the signs leading to. He said we should move somewhere far from the potential areas of conflict, such as northern Montana, but I refused. I’ve lived in Idaho Springs all my life. When we built our new house, we built it within sight of the old one. Now I wish I had listened. If I had, John wouldn’t have been in Denver the day it was hit.”

Kathryn silently curled her hand around Lynne’s, linking their fingers and wishing she could do more. But Lynne had been expecting this for half a year. She’d said she was ready, and Kathryn could only trust that she was right.

“I went through four months of sheer hell. The guilt has been...hard to live with. And that’s the main reason I debated about telling you this, because I’m worried you’ll tear yourself apart with guilt, too. But you shouldn’t. You couldn’t warn us. And John knew anyway. If anyone bears
the blame for him being in the wrong place at the wrong time, it’s me. So
don’t you do that to yourself. You gave us everything you could. And in
reality, John was fortunate. He was right at the epicenter—he probably
never even felt a thing. If you have to die, instantly is a good way to go.
And you and I both know he was going to die soon anyway. It’s been very,
very hard to live without him, but…it was just his time.”

She paused to take a drink from a clear bottle, visibly gathering herself.
“All right. That’s the worst news. The good news is that John had the fore-
sight to move the Foundation headquarters, even if he couldn’t convince
me to move along with them. And Richard is turning out to be quite a
star, bless his heart. He’s impossibly young still, but John’s training has
paid off, and I’m working with him now. He graduated summa cum laude
last month, if that means anything anymore. At any rate, he’s now my
heir, and practically my grandson. He’s been my lifeline since John’s
death. That boy is my great hope. He knows about you, Lynne. When I
made him my heir I told him everything, and he came up with a response
that simply floored me. He says your story is the beacon that can guide
humanity through this time. You are the proof that we will not only
survive these dark days, but we’ll thrive. We’ll come out the other side
and rebuild our planet, make ourselves better…and then we’ll fly through
the stars and explore the galaxy. I’m looking at this horrible mess with a
lifetime of memories behind me. This is not a world for me anymore. But
Richard—he’s grown up differently. He looks forward instead of back. He
was so excited after watching your message, and he says the Foundation is
going to be the key. Because we’re the only ones who know. We know
what will be. Maybe not in his lifetime, but certainly some time after. And
the only way to make sure that the future happens is to work for it now.
So he’s going to work for it.”

She smiled, for the first time in her message, and it transformed her
face. “Can you believe that kid? How does someone so young get so
smart? He’s only twenty-two, and he sees more clearly than I do. It’s just
one more sign that my time here is coming to an end. I’m ready to hand
this off to Richard, and let him safeguard your legacy. He’s got the energy
for it. I don’t. I just wish you could have known him, because you’d like
him a lot. I teased him that he spends so much time with me these days
that I should just adopt him and make him a Hamilton. And he looked at
me in that serious way of his and said, ‘I already am a Hamilton.’ And you know, he is.

“I know you’re probably hoping for the usual gossipfest that John and I used to turn these messages into. I hope you won’t mind too terribly if I say I can’t quite do that this time. Maybe next time. But there is one thing I really want to tell you. Lynne, you did the right thing. I’ve always been happy that you made a choice for love, but now I’m even happier. Because you’re living, right now, in those bright days that Richard is talking about. You’re on the other side of this. If I had known that the world as I knew it would end, and if I’d had the power to bundle you up in a time capsule and send you into the future, I’d have done it in a heartbeat. One of my greatest consolations these days is knowing that you’re happy and loved, and you’re not here seeing everything that meant anything to you going up in flames and ash and radiation. You are exactly where I would want you to be. It’s such a comfort to me that I can’t even express it. I watch that message of yours now, and look at your beautiful smile when you talk about Kathryn, and I think that a mother couldn’t ask for more.

“So…that’s it for this time. I hope next year’s message will be a little easier for both of us. And as Richard says, hope is what will see us through.” She smiled again. “Smart kid. He really reminds me of you.”

The screen went black.

Kathryn tightened her grip on Lynne’s hand, watching for her reaction. But there was none. Lynne simply let the PADD fall flat on her lap while she gazed out at the view. Sensing that words would be unwelcome now, Kathryn gave her a soft kiss on the cheek and sat back in her own chair, waiting.

It took a long time. Long enough to see the shadows of the mountains move; long enough to think of every possible thing that might be going through Lynne’s mind. At last Lynne stirred, raising their linked hands and kissing Kathryn’s gently before letting it drop. Silently she rose and went back to her pack, where she put the PADD away and pulled out something else. A small metal plaque, flashing in the late afternoon sun. With the plaque in one hand and what looked like a laserdrill in the other, she walked across to the boulder.

Kathryn followed. She’d had no idea Lynne had brought anything like this, and while wildly curious, she was not going to interfere in such an
intensely personal moment. But she would stay close in case Lynne needed her.

Lynne held the plaque against the boulder and swiftly drilled four holes through its corners. She looked up at Kathryn, her gaze calm. “Will you hold this, please?”

Kathryn accepted the drill, watching as Lynne dug four small bolts from her pocket and threaded one through each corner of the plaque. From another pocket she produced a driver, and in a few seconds she had permanently fastened the plaque to the boulder. “Thank you,” she said, taking the drill back. “What do you think?”

Kathryn stepped forward, getting her first good look.

*John Hayward Hamilton and Elizabeth Ann Hamilton

Love is not bound by time.*

“I think it’s beautiful,” Kathryn said quietly.

Lynne let out a soft expulsion of breath. “I miss them.”

“I know.” Kathryn wrapped an arm around her waist. “Are you doing all right?”

“Yeah. I am. I’ve had time to get used to it. And that plaque says what’s in my heart. They’ve loved me across four centuries. Their legacy is this world we live in now. I don’t know, maybe I’m just finding ways to make this acceptable to myself, but it seems to me that it had to happen this way. I had to leave them the knowledge to create the Foundation, so that you could be in the right place at the right time to find me…so that I could go back and leave them that knowledge.”

“Predestination paradox. Yes, I think you’re right. Does that mean you’ll stop beating yourself over the head about your decision?”

With a half-smile, Lynne said, “I don’t know, it’s gotten to be such a habit…”

“Lynne…” She made it a mock growl, and Lynne’s smile briefly flared before dropping away again.

“Yes, I will. Actually Mom’s message helps a lot. I absolutely believe what she said about being glad I’m here. And…I’m not surprised Dad saw it all coming. Funny, I never considered the fact that he’d draw an inference from my investment advice, but it makes perfect sense now. So in a way, I did warn them. And Dad did what he could. But it really hurts to
think of Mom living with that guilt, and going through her last years in a world gone insane. The truth is, Dad was the lucky one.”

Unwillingly, Kathryn remembered her own devastation when she had watched Lynne die in her arms. There was not a doubt in her mind that John Hamilton had been the lucky one. That Elizabeth had even managed to keep going, with the loss of her love and a literal Armageddon happening all around her, was a true testament to her spirit.

“Your mom was an incredibly strong woman,” she said.
“Yes, she was.”
“She raised an incredibly strong daughter.”

Lynne turned then, looking into her eyes. “She raised a daughter who had the smarts to make a choice for love. And that choice is my source of strength.”

To hear Lynne say that, after all the pain her decision had caused her, eased something deep inside Kathryn that had ached for a long time.

“Funny, it’s my source of strength too,” she said.

They shared a soft, tender kiss, pouring all their love for each other into the gentlest touches of lips and fingertips, and eventually drew back to rest their foreheads together. “Thank you for being here with me today,” Lynne whispered.

Kathryn kissed her again. “You don’t have to thank me. Nothing could have kept me away.”

After a long pause, Lynne lifted her head and looked back at the plaque. “I’ll have to tell Elise that she was right about her ancestor. Richard really did take over the Foundation. It sounds like he was the driving force that got it through the war.”

“And he gave your mother hope.”

“Yes, he did. She obviously loved him. It gives me a new perspective on why he might have changed his name to Hamilton. Elise assumed it was for the power of the name, but sometimes I think she internalized Melanie’s lessons a bit too deeply. Maybe he just did it out of love and respect.”

“Maybe you should tell her that, too.”

“I will.” Lynne lifted the laserdrill. “Come on, let me put this away.”

They walked back to their packs, where Lynne dropped the laserdrill and turned to look at the boulder again. The plaque was brilliant from this angle, reflecting the sun in a golden flare.
“Did you pick the color for this reason?” asked Kathryn.

“Actually, no, but it sure turned out well.” Lynne gazed at the plaque a bit longer, then gave a small nod. “It’s perfect. This is where I needed them to be.”

With the sun’s heat fading, the breeze atop the mountain was turning cooler. They both dug windbreakers out of their packs, and as Kathryn was putting hers on, she was startled by the chirp of her commbadge. She’d meant to set the privacy lock on it for the duration of their time here, but had forgotten in the excitement of getting to the summit. She looked up at Lynne, who gestured for her to accept. With a sigh, she tapped the badge.

“Janeway.”

“Kathryn, we’re back.”

“Revi! It’s good to hear your voice again! How was the honeymoon? And why didn’t I get nightly check-in calls?”

“I’m not even going to dignify the second question. But we had a really wonderful time. The Italians thought a goddess had landed among them when they saw Seven.”

“I think two goddesses landed,” said Lynne. “Their heads are probably still spinning.”

“Probably, but not because they thought I was a goddess. I spent the whole week in short sleeves. Or none.”

Kathryn and Lynne beamed at each other. If it had gone badly, they’d have heard it in Revi’s voice. “And?” Kathryn prodded.

“And it was fine.”

She could almost see Revi shrugging as she said it, minimizing the fact that she had just stepped over an enormous wall. “Well, congratulations!” she said.

Lynne added, “Yeah, we’re both up here grinning like fools. We’re proud of you, Revi.”

“Up there? Oh gods, did I interrupt your celebration? I’m so sorry. Why the hell didn’t you set the privacy lock?”

“You didn’t interrupt anything. We were just about done anyway.” She looked up at Lynne and added, “Lynne said goodbye to her parents today.”

“Ohhh. Lynne…damn, I wish I could give you a hug.”

“Just hold that thought. I’ll come collect it later.”

“Deal. Oh, the houses look beautiful. I can’t believe what a difference a week made. And guess who we ran into when we came by to check on them?”
“A couple of women who can’t stay away?” asked Lynne.

“Those are the ones. And guess what happened while we stood here talking about Venice?”

“Seven unveiled her plan for a complete overhaul of the water gate system.” Kathryn thought that was actually pretty likely.

Revi laughed. “No, but that’s a good guess. I’d tell you to keep trying, but you’ll never get it. Elise asked Alison to marry her. Right in front of us.”

“What?” they said simultaneously.

“Holy shit!” Lynne almost shouted. “I can’t believe it! Good for her!”

“Alison did say yes, I hope,” said Kathryn.

“She did. It took her a few seconds, which I think were probably the longest seconds of Elise’s life, but they’re officially engaged. Elise grew about ten centimeters, and Alison looks a little shocked. But in a good way.”

“That’s the best damned news I’ve heard all day,” said Lynne. “I’m getting all mushy.”

Kathryn looked up, seeing at a glance that she wasn’t kidding. Her eyes were shining with unshed tears, but she was smiling. Resting her hands on Lynne’s waist, Kathryn said, “That’s great news, and I think it came at a great time.” A tear escaped, but Lynne made no effort to wipe it away.

“Well, those two are a great match. Personally I can’t think of anyone else who could handle Alison the way Elise does.”

“Or vice versa,” said Kathryn. She gently rubbed a thumb along Lynne’s cheekbone, smiling at her. “Have they set a date?”

“No, I don’t think Alison’s brain is capable of thinking along those lines just yet.” Revi chuckled. “I’ve never seen her speechless before. It was a sight to behold.”

“I’m sorry I missed it,” said Lynne, her voice now a little husky. “But I’m really glad you called to tell us.”

After a short pause, Revi said, “Well, I’d better let you two get back to your moment on the mountain. Will we see you when you come home, or will you get there too late?”

“No, we’ll be home pretty soon. Keep a light on for us.”

“We will. And Seven’s thinking about making brownies, too.”

“Bribery is not necessary,” said Lynne. “We love you just for yourselves. But brownies are a nice extra.”
“Consider them done. All right, I need to call Mother now. She’s been waiting for news. We’ll see you two in a bit. Sandovhar out.”

Kathryn didn’t move from her spot. “Feeling a little overwhelmed?” she asked.

Lynne nodded, a few more tears leaking out. “Yeah. I think my heart’s just too full right now. What great news about Elise and Alison. I’m so happy for them.”

“Another piece of the family just came together, didn’t it?” Lynne lowered her head to her shoulder and quietly wept. It broke Kathryn’s heart, but she sensed that this was more a simple release of emotion than what she had dreaded earlier. She had been prepared for Lynne to crumble upon finally hearing about her father’s death, but that time had clearly passed. Lynne was moving on.

They all were.

It was only a minute or two before Lynne lifted her head, wiping her cheeks with both hands.

“Better?” asked Kathryn.

“Better. Just needed to let that out, I guess.” She looked toward the sun, now hovering just above the peaks. “We’ve got about fifteen minutes left before sunset. Shall we?”

Holding hands, they walked to the edge of the summit and stood silently, watching as the late slanting light turned the air orange. The sun touched the peaks, then gradually slid behind them, outlining them in fire. The few tiny wisps of cloud overhead flamed into brilliant color, growing brighter even as the glow of the mountains began to fade.

They stood there long after the brief flare of the clouds ended, long after the mountains shrouded themselves in the advancing night. Not until Venus became visible near the horizon did Lynne finally stir.

“We’d better go.”

“I know.” Reluctantly, Kathryn followed her back to their packs and picked hers up. Hoisting it over one shoulder, she took a final look at the darkening mountains. “B’Elanna did a fantastic job with that sunset she programmed, but I have to say, it couldn’t compare to this.”

“Don’t tell her,” said Lynne, slinging her own pack over her shoulder.

“I never would. She did us such a favor with that.”

Lynne laughed softly. “I remember her expression when I asked for it. She thought I had a hot date. I told her it was the hottest. And I was
right.” She turned, looking toward the boulder, but it was too dark now to see the plaque.

“One last look?” asked Kathryn.

Lynne hesitated. “No. We’ll be back. This isn’t goodbye. I thought it would be, but...it’s not.”

She understood. “It’s never really goodbye as long as you carry them in your heart.”

“Then it never will be.”

They looked into each other’s eyes until Kathryn could put it off no longer. Regretfully, she tapped her commbadge.

“Janeway to Comida One. Two to beam up.”
It’s ironic that I wrote the first novel in this series in 2002, and finished the last one in 2009. A seven-year journey, just like that of Kathryn and her crew. I’ve been fortunate to share it with so many.

Yes, this is the last novel of the Past Imperfect Series, though I suspect the adventures of these women are not at an end. With the best minds of the Federation working on it, that slipstream drive will probably be perfected in a few years—and I really can’t imagine Kathryn not taking advantage of it. Not as a captain, but perhaps as an ambassador to distant regions she knows, and which will now be within easy reach. After all, she did make a few friends out there. And just imagine the ship she and her team will design for such flights!

The good news is, I didn’t stop writing after this book. Instead, I created a whole new sandbox to play in. The Chronicles of Alsea is a series built around Lancer Tal from No Return, and begins when she rescues a starship captain (named Ekatya, in an homage to Kathryn) who has just crashed a giant ship on her planet. There are strong women galore in this series, and a richly imagined world in which you can happily immerse yourself.

The journey is not over if you don’t want it to be.

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